FIRESTICK FARMER

P. JULIAN
Firestick Farmer
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<EPIGRAPH>

Thus saith the Lord:

Execute judgment in the morning
And deliver him who is plundered
Out of the hand of the oppressor
Lest my Fury go forth like fire
And burn so that no one can quench it
Because of the evil of your doings…

I will kindle a fire in the forest
And it shall devour all things around it.

- Jeremiah 21:12-14

<TEXT OF BOOK BEGINS>

PART 1 - PROLEPSIS

Dear Nate,

I am now so far down this road that it seems crazy to be having second thoughts & yet I am now caused to question the wisdom of what I have done & the motivations of those who have assisted me, though it may be far too late in the day. If I have been used as a pawn it is entirely my own fault but it is done now & it is far too late for any apology or regret even if I could muster such feelings, with the enormity of what is to come. In any event all I would do is to change one aspect of things & even that may be something that I have no power to do, as I will explain –

I could dash in but I should say some preliminary things. In respect of my contribution to the debate on indigenous issues I have been a proponent of what I might call resistance for some time. Resistance and Return. I have spoken on this subject passionately but with no real effect & I have lately come to believe that any real change is going to result from action & not from mere words,

especially those well-meaning words that people would throw at me after they heard me speak –

I have also come to believe that methods that amplify the impact that a single person might have are likely to be the only effective methods of bringing the fight to the occupying powers & the current illegal state. I have adverted to the fact that the use of Fire might be one such method & while in public I have only hinted at that method I have in private with various like-minded associates been much more explicit about that possibility & its potential use especially as a form of resistance that can be wielded effectively even by one committed individual. I have also adverted to the fact that fire is our right & that our mandate to bring fire to our land has in no way been abrogated by the powers that now claim dominion over us & that we should not avert our attention from the power inherent in that mandate, the power for cleansing & renewal & driving out the invader who fears fire more than any other element –

I have seen fire before. I know how fast a house can be consumed by the smallest fire set against its timbers. I have been surrounded by fire in the living bush & I have felt the special terror & urge for flight that animals feel when fire is coming to consume them & men are no different. I have sat down in a deep corner of a creek & watched wallabies & deer crash madly through the bush & I have seen the sun burn red & then be swallowed up in a preview of the end of days & I have endured embers raining down accompanied by thunder as if the sky were spitting them down –

I know the power of fire. I also know that aboriginal people maintained the right to burn Our Land & I know that white people are foolish & build their houses where the trees give shade & also shelter for singing birds. They forget that each tree is also a potential killer when fire rages through country & that they will eventually face a hundred-foot wall of fire that will reduce all their notions into ashes. Birds can fly away. People get incinerated for their naiveté. A horror death & that is certain but representing only the reality of living in a land they don’t understand & can never hope to subdue. Aboriginal people were the architects of fire & not fire’s foolish victims & they may yet be the ones to thrive by fire, to thrive & to endure –

So, the story. I spoke these truths again & again in recent lectures & while people congratulated me for my courage to utter such heresy there was no action that resulted from my courage - so little that I began to wonder whether there was any courage in it at all, or rather just comfortable delusion, dreaming of justice that would never come. I met a few kids who were fired by my words but they wanted to put firebombs through shop windows, court windows, as if these shops, these courts are anything but the dull servants of the true oppression, the violent urge to subdue us –

Luck changes though. After one lecture I was walking back to Drummond Street when a man overtook me & asked whether I had a minute. I asked who wanted to know & he said a friend, a friend of your cause. A powerful friend, perhaps with the power to help you achieve what you seek to achieve –

That interested me, of course, even though he looked pretty ordinary & I accepted when he suggested that we walk down to Rathdowne Street for a cup of coffee. I wasn’t short of time & this man was strange & interesting even though he had a bland pan-asian look & accent. We walked down to Pandora’s with me silent & him talking all the way about architecture & its failure to produce anything really lasting by way of design. He pointed out porticoes & gabled roofs & told me that all of it was fashion – all of it ephemeral & fleeting & he said that aesthetics is always so vague & culture-bound. I told him I was no architect & he

said: there are architects of many types, Mr Farmer. All that it takes is to have some kind of plan –

We eventually sat down at a sidewalk table, me ordering tea & him ordering an affogato, after telling me that he really shouldn't –

I was blunt & told him that he was a bland looking sort of guy & hard to place in terms of his ethnicity. When I asked him about it he smiled & said he came from a bit of a chequered background – Straits Chinese with a bit of Indian & Portuguese thrown in for good measure. I asked for his name & he smiled again & said that names were not important in this endeavour, but that I was welcome to call him any name that I was comfortable with. I was smart & I said: Guy? & he smiled & said that Guy was a perfectly acceptable name. Whatever you like, he said & then he said: call me a citizen of the world, who has a proposal for you –

He talked around the subject for a while. He told me that there were powers in the world that shared various interests with my People as he called them & that they were eager to collaborate in the destabilisation of Australia's current regime. When I asked what powers he declined to elucidate, saying instead that they were interested in certain parts of northern Australia & I said minerals & he laughed saying: I suppose there is very little else there –

I told him that I had seen enough land-grabs by mining companies & that I was not interested in supporting such a thing. He told me that he understood, but that this was not just a land-grab by some company. Rather he said it was, and these were his exact words: a fundamental shift in ownership & control. I said I had seen enough of that too & he said: do not be obtuse. We will take what we need, but we could also restore you. We are not without heart. We are creatures of revolution & justice & we do not tolerate oppression, even though your government dissembles about that & calls us an oppressive state –

You want a homeland, he said. The southeast could provide one. Our interests are mainly in the north. I understand you wanting it all, but you should be realistic. You won't achieve anything unless you have our help –

I sat & stared at him & he looked back cool & inscrutable. I said: how do I know you won't just take it all? He laughed & said: there are no guarantees. But my people are well disposed to the underdog & you have no other choice, unless you consider native title an option. You know: they may give you howling waste, land they have no use for, but they will not give you what we offer. & you may also give them a taste of genocide for themselves –

He asked me whether I was interested to hear more & I told him I was. That mention of genocide had interested me, because I was used to hearing it bandied about by white academics who were always so earnest about it, but would never tolerate my suggestions that it should be paid back in kind upon the people who issued it. Guy warned me that hearing any more was to commit to the project & I said OK fine sure without really considering how such a contract might be enforced, were I to deviate from the strict execution of it –

The plan was fairly simple. His people had imported a number of incendiary devices that could be remotely controlled to ignite at any time & when I asked him how they worked he smiled & said a bit like a satellite phone hooked up with napalm. He smiled then & said that these devices had been very well tested & were proven to be extremely effective. I asked him how many devices there were & he said enough, enough to do the job properly –

That is the beauty of fire, he said. One man can seed many. & one man is hard to notice, if he is moderately discreet. They only ever arrest an arsonist after there is a fire. They seem never to anticipate such a thing. He was silent then & I thought of the possibilities & even I shuddered to think of them. I asked why me & he said: because it is your wish & it is your right. These are your words, not ours. He said that the timing relied upon various political & strategic reasons that were not relevant to me & that he did not need to discuss –

He told me that I would be needed for about a month & that I would have to start soon because optimal conditions were near at hand. I told him I would need a few days to think & he said: there is no time for that. Meet me here tomorrow. He told me that there were other candidates if I were to refuse; lesser ones but still effective & he reminded me not to speak of this to anyone. It goes without saying, he said –

I did not get much sleep that night, although it was mostly for eagerness rather than worry for my own sake or the sake of anyone else. I had been dreaming about fire for such a long time & this would be so much more than just me running around with matches touching off little fires at random. I had little choice about it anyway, if I was picking up the man's subtext properly –

When I got to Pandora's my friend was nowhere to be seen, but there was a man sitting at our table & he motioned me to sit down. He looked like he might have been Turkish, but he spoke with a soft American accent & so I had no idea where he might be from. As I sat down I told him that they were really keeping me guessing & he smiled distantly & then engaged me in random conversation about sport & even love & when I tried to discuss the plan he deflected the question by pretending I was talking about building plans & a plan he had to seduce a woman at work. I cottoned on eventually & I engaged in that inane conversation & when I was through with my coffee I said it was great to catch up & he said, pointing at the table: don't forget your keys –

They weren't my keys, but I picked them up & walked away, saying for good measure: see you soon, or something like that. As I walked back up to Drummond St I looked at the tag on the key ring & saw written there an address way down on the peninsula, somewhere close to where your uncle has his place –

The next day I slept late & I woke cursing myself for doing so. I took a train down to Frankston & then jumped on the peninsula bus. I was nervous about being watched but I decided that I must have been watched for a long time & if anyone were watching they would be friend & not foe & that the chips must now fall as they would. I was nervous but I sat that bus quietly & watched for street names & waited for my stop to come –

I got off the bus one stop too late & I backtracked to the right road & then I walked as fast as I could towards the address that was on the key tag. It was a fair trudge & I began to think about hitching, but I thought it might draw attention to me & so I just walked on. Eventually I got to a small carved sign with the number I needed & I walked down a track through ti-tree scrub which eventually opened out into a lean sandy paddock ringed with low hills. The paddock was home to caravans & old cars & trailers & shipping containers & all sorts of crap, with a small herd of water buffalo grazing in the middle of it all, oblivious to the rusting metal as they cropped the scant grass. The whole scene was a bit surreal & I kept expecting those gnarled beasts to attack me, or maybe just to disappear –

I wandered around the paddock looking for god knows what, until I remembered my key tag with its electronic key. I pressed the button a few times & a white van blipped at me & I walked over to it. The interior was sparse but clean & on

the passenger seat there was another key attached to a tag marked: Container. I tried it in the padlock of the brown container next to the van & it snicked open as easy as you like. I wrenched the doors open & found it mostly bare, except for some stacks of unmarked cardboard boxes pushed up against the far end –

There would have been a couple of hundred boxes there & when I sliced one open with my key I found it full of foot-long pieces of what looked like ordinary sticks, the kind you would see lying around under eucalypt forest. As much as I looked & even scratched at one I could not work out whether it was in fact timber & I thought I might try to break one but I decided that might be unwise, given what I had been told about these devices. All the weight was down one end & I decided that was the business end & I put the stick gently back into its box –

I went back to the van to have a proper look at it. It was a long-wheelbase model, with metal panels in the back instead of windows. With the ladder & the lengths of PVC pipe secured tight to its roof rack it looked like any trade van you might see & when I slid the side door open I saw there was a narrow wooden shelf with a mattress & a pillow & a sleeping bag ready to go. Save for a spare wheel the rest of the cargo space was empty –

On the front seat there was a road atlas covering Victoria & half of New South Wales & when I opened it I noticed that there were small red crosses scattered across each map & I could easily guess what they might be for –

In the glove box was a yellow envelope packed with ten twenty & fifty dollar notes. I half expected to see a pistol in there, a long square automatic maybe, but apart from the banknotes there was a tin full of change & nothing else. I counted the money until I got past five thousand dollars & I reckoned I had counted about half. I guessed that would be plenty of money for fuel & food & then some –

All that I lacked was any clear direction about what I was supposed to do, or rather where I was to start. I sat for a while staring down the buffalo, if that was what they were, trying to think of a plan. I had a lot of country to traverse & I began to feel the narrow peninsula as a dangerous bottleneck, as though I might be cornered down here & taken with nowhere to run. I thought I might get the ferry over to Queenscliff & go on from there but I decided that I needed no such contact with people who might remember me & as inconvenient as it was I was going to have to go the long way around –

I found some resolve eventually & I made a start. I packed the van with boxes & I put the box I had opened on the passenger side floor. When the van was about half full I locked up the container, after I wrestled the door-levers home. I was sorely tempted to stay there in the paddock for the night, but there was plenty of light left & I supposed that anywhere would be safer than here, with the peninsula closing in like a net –

I started the van & it hummed into life as sweet as you like. I drove out of the paddock & closed the gate behind me & then I turned left because that seemed to be as good a way as any. I started to drive roughly north through hilly country & then I bore eastwards & it was all a bit aimless & when dusk came down I pulled up in a supermarket car park in some unremarkable town. I bought myself some cheese & bread & a litre of milk & when I had eaten I got in the back of the van & slept, right there in the car park –

In the morning I woke with the sun cooking the van & when I saw where I was I cursed myself for sleeping so indiscreetly. But there was no investigation, no outrage, no undue interest in a trade van left in a car park overnight –

I drove north into state forest & I eventually stopped for a leak & afterwards I just sat down on leaf litter & tried to clear my head. I told myself that I needed to choose either to do this thing or not do it & have no qualm about that decision whatever the consequences might be. I knew that I had gone too far to stop without sanction & I also knew that I had talked this talk for a long time & I told myself that this was no time for cowardice. I also knew that were it not me it would be another black man, or straits Chinese or whatever else. I lay down & I looked up at the trees around me & I knew that they did not mind to burn & I knew in fact that they desired it. They themselves in the past had told me so & these trees in their great ponderous silence confirmed that it was so –

I wondered what the source of my cowardice was & I could not find it, but I knew it was cowardice nonetheless & that was enough for me. I got back in to the van & studied that map & I saw a line of crosses heading east from a point just south of where I was parked & so I cranked up the van & headed for that first point which would be my starting point & I supposed my ending point as well –

The thing that surprised me about the next three & a half weeks was that no one took even the slightest notice of me. I bought some overalls at a K-mart in an effort to look the part & I used plentiful amounts of spray deodorant so that I would not stink too much. I parked the van after dark on small streets in quiet towns & no one paid me any heed at all. I was off usually around daybreak, anonymous in my uniform van that looked like every other white van in existence –

& I lived well. I would eat out of chain supermarkets & bakeries & I would bet that not one of the bored teenagers or housewives who served me would remember the slightest thing about me. I was polite & no more than that & so I drifted under their dull radar like a ghost. I ate pies & bread & crackers & cheese & sometimes salami or a roast chicken & canned fruit & I actually put on some weight. I drank iced coffee & soft drink from the service stations where I refuelled & I chewed gum to clean my teeth & it was easily as effective as toothpaste –

& I hit those crosses. I went east to the border & then turned back west again & I traversed the state without breaking my line. In the west I also drove north-south & when I had covered that part of the state I cut across some desert county & sowed the corridor up through Canberra to Sydney & then I jagged back south again, seeding the mountains with fire –

I had no instructions on how to handle the firesticks but to me they seemed pretty robust & I ended up handling them so. The first couple I walked out & buried under dry leaf litter, but then I started to think about the power of the things & also their appearance & I knew that they needed none of that. Pretty soon I relaxed completely & I would just get out of the van & pretend to take a piss & just fling one or two into the bush when I was sure no cars were coming. That made me very fast & I got a heap of them out in a very short space of time. I had to return to the shipping container a couple of times & I lost my fear & I packed that van up good & high so there was scarcely room for me to sleep –

I have known the loneliness of the living bush, but the loneliness of the road is of another order altogether. If you avert your eyes & keep moving no human being will register that you even exist & so there is a grave freedom in following the endless bitumen. In a clean van without speeding you may go wherever you please & in whatever order you like, sowing mayhem without relent & never being questioned or challenged about it. You must remain in motion, though, without seeking to claim or to stay in one specific place or other. As long as you are in motion you are utterly free, despite the opportunity this brings for massive resistance or criminal damage or however you choose to frame it. I was free to

seed fire in every corner of the state, whereas if I had merely sought to stay put, just for the business of living, I would have been moved on or fined or beaten or sent down to the lockup. & it occurred to me that there was a strange justice in this, for this effort to be living as a nomad once again –

I had plenty time to think while I was on the road. For a while I would wonder about who was sponsoring me & whether they cared much for me or the cause that I was pursuing, as vague as it was by then. I would look back at my cargo & wonder whether one of those firesticks had my name on it. If they were so easily controlled it would be nothing for them to light one up & destroy me in an inferno that would leave just dentine among the ashes of my bones & perhaps not even that. I never really overcame that thought, especially as I neared the end of my mission, but I decided that such a death would be a quick one & a fair one in a way, because I was consigning so many others to the fire & death held no real fear for me any longer, now that I had nothing left –

I was very thorough in covering those maps, even when they took me to wheat country & arid country with seeming little to burn. I went to Ouyen & Warracknabeal & I drove the Pyrenees & past the vines of Great Western. I hit Kerang & Echuca & Shepparton seeding fire as I went. I drove through Spa country & I traversed the Goldfields & the wet Otways wondering how they would ever burn. I rode high Hotham & Bogong & I felt Kosciusko call me from the chalets at Thredbo when I tossed a firestick into that august country. I seeded bushland in Canberra in clear view of suburbia & in Melbourne I visited actual suburbs that seemed the work of the insane. Wooden houses on steep slopes thick with sclerophyll forest that would quickly turn deadly. Quaint Belgrave, Upwey, Sassafrass. I noted that the crosses were always to the north of potential targets & I read the topography & set them on slopes where they would be funnelled by updrafts into firestorms without relent. I sowed certain death for people who even then looked through their trees & counted themselves lucky to live among them. If I ever had a qualm about it I would look at those trees & know that they desired to burn & I felt the insanity of a desire to live there & I felt the whole country aching sometimes for fire to clean it up. I knew that this was my land & the land of my people & that fire was our love for the land made palpable. I also told myself that this destruction was historical inevitability & all that the colonists had cheated was time –

I made good time. I was done by just before Christmas, or at least I had hit most of those markers & sown some firesticks of my own accord. I had drunk no alcohol whatsoever for that entire time & I had no desire for it but as soon as I was finished a powerful thirst came upon me & I thought I deserved to have at least one or two beers as a bit of a reward. I drove through a bottle shop & ordered a six-pack of Coopers & as the attendant was getting them I saw they had a special on a block of some passable interstate beer & I yelled out & changed my order. I drove to a truck stop & I sank some cans while I sat there listening to idiot talkback radio & I did not stop drinking & drinking & even though those cans got warm I drank until I was completely fucking maggoted –

I sank those cans but I honestly cannot account for that & even less for what happened next. Some spirit was loosed in me by the grog & I felt something like dread, especially when I looked in the back & saw those empty boxes. I looked at them as though it were my first sight of them & I knew that I had to retrieve the firesticks I had thrown & that I had to do it immediately. I flogged the van back up the line I had last taken & I went hunting for firesticks although I could hardly see straight. I was fucked up & I had thrown them without waiting to see them land & they were well camouflaged & after visiting five sites & with dusk falling fast I had retrieved none of them. I drove into the next town with cans rattling around my feet & I went to a burger shop to get something to eat &

when I got back to the van there was a sheet of lined paper on my seat, marked in thick texta with one half-word: tsk –

I was still pretty drunk but that straightened me out a bit. I started the van & drove directly north, thinking perhaps to drive to Darwin & to get a boat up to the islands or Indonesia or somewhere. I drove for a fair while trying to dream up some escape but as the beers wore off I started to see the futility of flight & I pulled into a rest stop & fell into the back & slept for a long while & right into the next morning –

I eventually woke in a hot van with a rough head & a dry mouth. I drank deeply from a tap that warned me not to drink from it & I knew it was over & that I could not change what I had done. I turned the van around & headed back south towards my point of origin. I drove well within the speed limit & I skirted around the city, glancing over at the tall buildings every so often thinking: how long will they last? & also thinking that most people presumed ignorantly that they would stand there forever. Eventually I found my way back to where I had started from, squeezed tight between those two seas that push the peninsula down to its point –

The paddock was as I had found it & the container I had opened was still there waiting for me. I got out of the van & was met with a desolate wind & I could hear the buffalo snuffling & lowing & that too was a mournful sound –

I heaved open one door of the container & unloaded the van of the few boxes that were left. I stacked the remaining boxes neatly & I kicked the doors shut & locked them with the padlock. I drove the van to the other side of the paddock just to be safe & then I reasoned that the van could be mined anyway & that nowhere was safe for me anymore. I sat & drank half a warm can & it disgusted me & then I got in to the back of the van & lay there spooked for a little while, but fatigue overcame me & I slept reasonably well despite the daylight outside & the wind buffeting the van –

As night fell I woke & ate fruit out of a plastic cup, wondering what I should do. I guessed that the best thing was to leave the van where I had found it but it was getting late & I had a desperate desire to sleep in a proper bed that night. I decided to split the difference & drive it back to town & leave it somewhere. I knew I was being watched & that my friends would be able to deal with the van if I just left it on a city street somewhere. I also thought about the money & I decided I might as well take it rather than go poor. My bosses seemed too well resourced to miss a few thousand dollars & if they would begrudge it there was nothing to fear from them anyway –

In the dusk with the wind gone I cleared out all of the cans, empty & full alike & I threw them in a skip & I turned that key for the last time & brought the van back to life. I trundled down to the quiet highway & soon I was rolling up the freeway towards town. I stopped for a burger & some fuel & then I drove straight back to Carlton, just one street back from your place. I parked the van & took the packet of cash & I left the keys on the floor, walking to your house under the glare of streetlamps. I did go back the next day to check on the van, thinking I might return it, but I looked up & down the street where I had left it & it was nowhere in sight –

When I got back to Drummond St Jane opened the door bleary-eyed & kissed me & then told me that I was in dire need of a shower. I saw you the next day Nate & I am sorry I told you lies about being back up in the bush with my rifle & my creek but in some ways it was no lie because that is still where my heart lives, not driving through dry country, doling out destruction by the long arm of a

foreign power. But I should not denigrate it like that, for it was my wish also that it be that way –

That is the end of the story. The only other thing I can tell you is that I saw my friend Guy again yesterday & he told me that the weekend was a very likely time, unless something intervened. I asked him why he was telling me & he told me with feigned surprise that we were partners & that I had done my job well. He said there were others not so good & I asked him how many there were & he said: there were enough. We could not let this fail. He also said that everyone loves someone & he was giving me a chance to tell the people I loved to stay in the inner city & preferably the innermost city in a building of brick or stone –

He was friendly, but he did scold me, I guess for getting drunk. We saw what you did, he said. You know that we saw you & we still see you. You are our friend & we will protect you absolutely but not if you are stupid or you act against our interests. If you betray our trust then we will not waste time lamenting that fact. As you have seen we deal with our enemies directly & without hesitation –

& I know very well that this may impact directly on what I now aim to do –

Nate you may be familiar with the quote in the liner notes from that Billy Bragg album you gave me once & I forget the exact detail but it is something like: can a man be an effective agent for social change if he has never felt love? & is the psychology of a radical, all the outrage & yearning for violence & the desire to bring things down, is it merely a symptom of the same thing? Never having been loved?

What I think is missing there is that some people can be loved & loved deeply & be unable to feel it. When I look back I see that I have objective evidence of being loved as you well know & yet I do not think I have ever been able to feel it. Even my mother, who absorbed blows that were intended for me & all I did was rage against her for exposing me to that coward in the first place. & there is also Elle, who loved me enough to choose me once, but who stopped loving me because I could not accept love or even feel love or reciprocate it in any way –

I don’t know, because I cannot have knowledge of what I do not have. But I do know that exactly as I was condemning these people to death I was relenting from my hatred & that this relent in me has so ripened that I have found myself wishing that I could undo what has been done. But surely I have not desired that strongly enough because I could have spoken up & yet I have not. It was not for fear of any danger to my own self because I have had little to live for since I lost my marriage & indeed I have often longed for death & even thought to bring it upon myself, by my own hand –

I am not going to resile from my actions entirely. This country has been illegally occupied & subdued by savage powers bent on plunder rapine murder & the wholesale destruction of an ancient culture. Individuals who benefit from this dispossession are complicit in this evil & they deserve to suffer if they hear these truths & do not relent from their occupation. But they deserve fair warning, if nothing else. It was not accorded to my people but I would accord it to them because unlike them I am not Savage. This catastrophe is of their own making but they deserve to witness it - this time at least - from the safety of their cities & not be consumed by it. That is what I wish to give them – fair warning of the cataclysm that is to come –

& there may be people who are less complicit than others. I will mention the Irish, many of whom were sent here in chains & also by famine engineered by the same powers that occupied our lands & devastated our people. They were not all of them saints, not by any stretch, but history records that the Irish were

very often friends to our people & often protected them & it is also a matter of record that even at the dawn of the 20th Century the Irish were utterly despised in this country, perhaps even more than our own people. They are like us a gentle & hospitable people & alcohol also brings them undone & for that European civilization has laughed at them & ridiculed them & subjected them to oppression. Freud (famously) dismissed the Irish & there have also been others. Bernard is of that stock & so is Jane & Mary was too & they have all showed me respect & compassion & especially unstinting hospitality even where it was undeserved & no matter how I behaved. You were not born to it but its influence runs in you too, Nate. There have been great Irish heroes - some even in this land - who stood against oppression & I thought of this downtrodden people & I thought: I would not see you perish by fire. I would see you return of your own free choice to your own lands & perhaps bring cleansing there & even your own version of Return –

So I aim to give fair warning. It was given in the Jerilderie letter, before history had decided that Edward Kelly would fall before he achieved his aim of ridding Victoria of the savage colonial powers who eventually hanged him. I will also issue fair warning but this time it emanates from a hand that has the authority to issue it & who has more than just courage & outrage. A man who will back up that warning with weapons that he is mandated to wield by the very land that longs to be delivered. I do not use the weapons of the oppressor for they obey their masters who wield them in overwhelming number. I wield fire by profound & ancient mandate & it will strike fear in their hearts & rout them & it will drive them hence –

Nate I know that History will count me for this action & not for others because History ignores the mundane details of life even though they far outweigh notable events & actions. I have been naive in dealing with people who are obviously well organised & well used to dealing death & they may well deal it to me before this episode is finished. My chances are getting worse with every urge I have to relent & they may have some timing in mind to take me unawares. If they rig things so as to make me invisible that is fine but if they put me up as either mastermind or dupe then I will need you to tell my story, if you will do that for me. I don't ask you to gild things but just to tell them plainly leaving nothing out –

That is all I ask of you, for the sake of our long friendship. I am not going to claim that I loved anyone or was even good or sometimes kind because love may have been kicked out of me when I was young but if there's some approximation of it that wounded people feel then I have felt it: for Elle & for Jane & for Mary before her & for you & Bernard & Ruthie even though I know I have always frightened her a bit & now I clearly see why, with what my hatred has made me capable of. I mean to make such amends as I can but if I fail you should tell my people how I was misguided & wrought terror but also that I relented from it & that I sought to undo it even at such a late stage –

As I have said I still wish for this to happen. I still wish for the illegal civilization & this brutal stranglehold to be ended & I know that fire is the way to do it at least in the early stages. We must let the Land & what is in it drive the invaders away. All I want to do is give one warning. The brutal culture of the white man had the chance to give such a warning to the Japanese & yet they elected to savage the innocent without warning & to do it twice & even now they make no apology for doing so. I will give fair warning or I will perish in the effort. May I be judged for that intention & not for what I might actually cause to happen –

Nate before I finish I want to thank you. I don't think I have ever really thanked you for any of your kindness & more for the fact that you never turned away from me no matter what I asked of you & how little I deserved your help. I don't

feel your feelings but I can judge your actions & you never, not once no matter how far I sank, you never said no to me. You're a goofy bastard & you show kindness to everyone but that does not undermine the kindness you have shown to me because it was shown in friendship & obvious love & without a hint of superiority or pity. I know that I should have come to you earlier to tell you what I am telling you now, but that may have endangered you & even now I cannot be sure that this letter does not put you in terrible danger. All I can say is that if you face more suffering on my behalf I am truly sorry –

Tell my story. Some people will understand. Even if that is not true, I still deserve a hearing. I always acted from a rational basis & I thought that was the important thing & if I missed out on something it was something beyond my imagining. Throwing out those firesticks was done by my automatic self in rage & loathing & that rage is so deep in me that I wonder whether it is just myself, my real self, at the deepest level of my psyche. That I was born to this, that I am vengeance, personified. That is perhaps the most terrifying & exhilarating thought of all –

I remain thankful to you & forever in your debt –

Your friend –

JPF

& my love to those women of yours for what it is worth & also Bernard whose deep sanity should have showed me what I lacked & even now is there telling me to be courageous & to have no fear even of death -

PART 2 - EPITAPH

I first met James Farmer when my parents moved from the city down to a small farm just outside of Lindenow, down in the heart of lush green Gippsland. That was more than two decades ago, before this long drought turned the whole of the south-east into tinder.

We moved down over the Christmas holidays, directly after I finished primary school. My parents had wanted to make a tree change, which in those days was still considered a mild form of insanity. Dad had grown up on a little dairy farm in the Western Districts and he had never lost his desire to escape the city and get himself back on the land. Lindenow was close enough to a large regional centre, and so dad could get himself a transfer in his job as a supermarket manager. But that work was just to pay the bills, he always said, and in his mind he was a dinky-di farmer, perhaps fallen on hard times, and needing to supplement his income with work that he had no real passion for just to pay the bills.

If you saw us all in a photo there would be one question on your lips, and to meet the issue head-on I will set out a little detail about how I came to be part of this family. Mum and Dad were pretty much white-bread Catholic Australians from mixed English and Irish stock, though if you listened to my father you would have thought he was as Irish as the Blarney Stone. We were a family, along with my big sister Ruthie, but my blood did not mingle with their blood. I learned about that much earlier than most adopted children, because my skin was a deep copper-black, and my features were nothing like their features.

The first time I asked about it Dad told me that I should know that they loved me and would do anything for me, and that I was their son without any doubt about it. He told me that I did not arrive like babies usually did, that I was special and given to them as a gift. I suppose I assimilated that information, and I eventually found out that I had been left at a convent in one of the rough suburbs bordering the inner city, and had by one means or another ended up in the care of my parents. I'm not even really sure that it was completely legitimate, the way I ended up theirs.

I don't recall any time before I knew that I was adopted, and I think that might be the best way for it to happen, because such revelations can shock people very badly. I have always known that Mum had not been able to have any more children after Ruthie, and that I was a Gift from God, and there was not a day that they did not thank Jesus Mary and Joseph that I had been gifted to them. I also knew that my birth mother must have loved me too, because she gave me to the nuns only because she knew that she could not look after me properly. Later I filled out this understanding with the many reasons why she might have given me up – addiction, or illness, or just grinding poverty – and later still I learned there were other more sinister possibilities, the coercion that shaped the fates of the stolen generations.

Growing up black in a white family brought with it a host of difficulties, especially when I started school. I won't rehearse those difficulties here, because anyone with a brain can imagine them, and I don't offer them by way of excuse. Many kids grow up in the context of rough treatment and exclusion, especially through going to school. I consider myself lucky in that I could always retreat to a loving environment at home, unlike Jim and a host of other kids that I could name.

The only other thing I should mention about my family was Ruthie. She was a couple of years older than me, and as sweet as you like. She didn't speak much until she was three or perhaps four, and even then her speech was quite underdeveloped. When she went to school the teachers told Mum and Dad that she had some special needs, although I don't think that the language back then would have been so polite. They got a teacher's aide for her, but the other kids were terribly cruel, and she came home crying every afternoon and did not want to go back there. When Mum finally told Dad about it he flew into a rage, which ripened that night, and in the morning he drove down to the school and gave the teacher, the principal, and even the children in Ruthie's class a severe talking to. He then took her out of school, and she was home-schooled from that point on. Mum proved to be a very decent teacher, and Ruthie learned to read and write to a reasonable level, and her numeracy was actually pretty good. She remained very straightforward and sweet, but she had very little peer interaction and was generally regarded as a bit simple, as grotesque as that word sounds these days.

Dad always made it clear that I was bound to look after my sister, and he worked that into the myth surrounding my adoption. You were a gift to us that we did not understand, he would say. But now things are very clear. I had been sent to look after Ruthie, he said, and my job was to look after her after he was gone and could look after her no longer. He would hold my shoulders and eyeball me and ask me sternly whether I understood, and I would tell him that I did, that I would always look after Ruthie. He would ruffle my hair and say: good boy. I knew it, the moment I first set eyes on you. I knew that God had given us a good one.

* * *

I met Jim on my first day at the new school, while we were playing Red Rover down by the maintenance shed. He was quick, and he got a perverse kick out of being in the middle, pointing each time to his next victim and nodding: You. He

would invariably tag his target, too, and he tagged hard with a closed fist on the soft part of the shoulder, and you were in no doubt when he punched you that you were done and would be joining him in the middle.

I had run safely a couple of times when he pointed at me and nodded. I ran straight at him, which surprised him, and with him flat-footed I baulked left and then ran wide to the right and got past him to touch the wall safely. I beat him twice more by dragging him one way and then bolting wide the other way, and I was only caught when a couple of other kids decided to single me out too. Jim thumped me pretty hard when I was caught, but he knew I had the better of him, and he didn't keep whaling on me like he would do to some unfortunate kids.

After the bell rang he walked over to me and asked me my name. I told him, and he introduced himself and said that I was a good runner. I told him that he punched pretty well too, and he said that he had a boxing set in his shed and that I should come around if I wanted to learn how to punch. I went around there the next day, after asking mum, and he showed me how he could keep a speedball moving, and he laughed at me when I had a go at it and completely messed it up.

You need to practice, he said.

So we became friends, in that unabashed way that kids do. We started to hang out at school and after school and on the weekends. We used to hang around his place quite a lot, and I gradually learned to keep the speedball moving, and do some tricks with the skipping rope, and also how to slug the heavy bag without wrecking my hands and wrists. I also sparred with Jim a little, wearing a fat soft head guard while he went bare-headed, and although I eventually got a bit better all I could really do was keep my guard up and jab at him sometimes. He would dance around me and throw volleys of punches into my gloves and arms and midsection, and although he usually pulled them a little I didn't really enjoy it.

He would tell me about some guy on television who could snatch speeding arrows out of the air with his hands, and he said that he was going to do stuff like that when he was older, getting rich and famous by having the fastest hands in the world. I asked him about being a boxer, and he shrugged. Maybe, he would say. He said that boxers took a lot of punishment and that sometimes they died from it, and that catching arrows might be an easier way to make money.

I suppose he may have been put off professional boxing by his stepfather, a bastard of a man if ever there was one. Colin had been a promising junior boxer, but he was badly beaten in his first pro fight, and after that he just gave up and worked shit jobs and fuelled his bitterness with drink. He had that strange twisted look about him that I now associate with alcoholic brain damage, although it might also have been some of the punches he had worn, back in those earlier days.

I was pretty naive about things but even I knew that Colin was dangerous and that I should stay out of his way. He would arrive home with the stink of grog on him and pull on his old gloves, and when that happened I would get the fuck out of that ring. Jim always stayed, despite my efforts to pull him out of there. Colin would box him into a corner and then slug him really hard, in the head as well as the body, and if Jim went down Colin would jeer at him and call him a b---g and dare him to get back up. Eventually Jim would stay down, and Colin would pull off his gloves and throw them at Jim and call him a black cunt and whatever else he could dream up in his hateful little mind. In my fantasies I saw myself getting in to the ring and flattening him, but I stood even less chance against him than Jim did. All I could do was wait until he had gone, pick Jim up, and tell him: you don't have to fight him you know. Jim would say: I know. But I want to fight him. I want to fight him and I want to fucking kill him.

With Colin gone I would get back into the ring and let Jim hit me a bit. I suppose I wanted to make him feel better, although I don't think I was aware of that motivation at the time. Letting him hit me a little just seemed to help to bring things back to normal, as strange as that may be to say.

I learned to move my feet, and how to hit a speedball, but I was never going to become a decent boxer. Jim had a book written by some great American fighter, and he would quote it, saying things like: you have to have it in you, in the shape of your heart. And if you do have it in you: you need to train, and train hard, because it will come out of you one way or another. His real dad had been to jail, Jim said, and he had died there, and it was all because he didn't train, because there was no one to tell him that he should train. I asked Jim how he knew that about his Dad and he said that he just knew it from his own experience, like the book said, that you could feel such things if you had that sort of character. I told him that I had no idea what my real father was like, and he said not to worry, and that it would come out of me in time. Although I can tell you one thing about him, Jim would laugh. It's pretty obvious that he was not much of a boxer.

* * *

The boxing could be brutal, but Jim was tough and could take the punishment far better than his poor mother could. She wore bruises from time to time, and they were much worse bruises than Jim himself would wear. Looking back now I am amazed that no one intervened, but they were different times and apart from my mother asking her occasionally whether she was OK there was nothing done to save either of them from the violence and terror in their lives.

I liked Mrs Farmer, although I was often a bit embarrassed by her. She touched my hair and asked me to call her Maisie, and although I tried a few times I felt more comfortable with Mrs Farmer, and eventually she laughed and told me it didn't matter that I was making her feel old. She seemed a fair bit older than my own mother, and no matter the time of day she would be sipping from a middy of beer that somehow would remain perpetually full.

She was very kind to us. Around noon on a Saturday or Sunday she would drift across the lawn to where we were, and tell us that lunch was ready. She built us giant steak sandwiches with fried onion and egg and loads of barbeque sauce, and she would stroke Jim's wavy hair while he ate and say strange things about the past or her difficult life. Sometimes she would cry and that was embarrassing for me and also for Jim. You are both such wonderful boys, she would say, and then laugh a hard laugh and say: but that does not last. Jim would squirm and enquire after more food and she would say: see, see, always wanting more.

She was kind but she was also wasted away, body and soul, and there was so little of her that I can't imagine how she endured for as long as she did. Mum would send food with me sometimes – potatoes or greens or raw milk - and I passed these on to Mrs Farmer with Mum's advice that these homegrown foods would be good for her. She would smile and thank me and then feed them straight to us boys – chips and milkshakes and however else it came. We loved it, of course, but looking back now over all that time I knew her there was not a single time that I ever saw her eat.

* * *

Jim and I were best mates right through secondary school, right up to the end of year ten. In winter we played football together, which he mostly played for the fights, and he did some summer athletics with me until he worked out that he lacked just that yard of pace that he needed to win any races. We went fishing

and swimming and poached yabbies out of other people's dams, and though we used them to stock our dam at home the birds always ended up getting them. Jim kept training in his backyard, but despite a bit of interest in him he never took up the invitation to train at the local gym.

Things were pretty much fine, but then one day Jim didn't come to school. I presumed that he was ill, but at lunchtime I heard that he was down by the edge of the cyclone mesh fence, asking for me, and I ran down there to see him.
He looked a little rough when I saw him. He had a busted lip, and there was something strange about his eyes, like they were brighter and wider than usual. I asked him what was going on, and he just said: meet me at the train station when you get out of here. I went back to class for the afternoon, but it was a bit hard to concentrate, and when the home bell rang I sprinted down to the station. I found Jim there in the same condition as he had been in at lunchtime, only now he had two fat sports bags with him, one of which was mine.

I asked him again what had happened and he told me that he would fill me in on the train. He shoved my bag at me and pretty much dragged me on to the carriage, and when I asked him about tickets he pulled out two tickets and waved them in my face. I told him that I couldn't go anywhere, that I needed to get home, and he said that he couldn't go home any more. Just wait until the train moves, he said, and I will tell you the story.

The train slowly filled with passengers, and Jim kept glancing at the platform as if he expected to see something unpleasant. I just sat there, trusting him. As the train began to move Jim settled back in his seat and let out a little whoop. On our way, he said. When I asked him again where we were going, he punched my arm and smiled and said: out of this fucking shithole, my friend.

* * *

Out of one shithole and into a bigger one. We ended up in a shitty suburb on the outer reaches of the city. If you know the place I won't have to name it here, and if you don't know it believe me: you are better off that way.

On the train Jim had told me the story. He had arrived home the previous afternoon to find his Mum in a bad way, coughing blood, with both eyes closed over from her latest run in with Colin. Jim went outside to find him passed out on a banana lounge, and he shouted to wake him up, and then just popped him one right in the face as he lay there blind in the sun. Colin roared and got up and tried to hit Jim but he was sun-blind and drunk and slow, and Jim got around him and belted him hard on one side of his head and then the other. Jim told me that something hot seemed go off inside him at that point, and he exploded in a torrent of punches that sent Colin face-first into the grass. Jim then started kicking the shit out of him, kicking him he said until the toes on his right foot felt as good as broken, and Colin soon stopped moving and lay still. Jim said that he had thought of caving his head in with the block splitter but finally he just left him and went inside to his mother and told her what had happened. She set up a wail and told him to get out, saying over and over: he will kill you, when he sobers up he will kill you. Jim tried to get his mother up and out of there but she said no and that he would kill her too if she left him. Jim pleaded with her to come, but she just wailed and begged him to leave, and eventually he went to his room, packed what a few clothes, stole a few dollars from Colin's work pants, and then ran out of the house.

Jim slept that night in a piece of concrete storm-water pipe that they had installed in a local playground for the kids to run through. It was cold but it was dry, and in the morning he spent some of his scarce money on a carton of iced coffee and tried to work out a plan. He decided that he would head in to the city

and stay with some relatives he had up there, at least until he could find a better option. He decided to bring me with him, so he hitched out to Lindenow and scoped out my house. He found the place deserted, and so he went to my room and grabbed some clothes and stuffed them into my sports bag.

And there we were. We rode that train, and then we trudged the long walk out to Jim's relatives, our bags chafing at our shoulders. If I had been thinking clearly I would have turned back and had Jim stay at our place, maybe sending my Dad in to deal with Colin. I had never known Dad to fight, but he was a big man, and I know that he would have no fear of cowards who beat up on women and children. Colin would have shat himself at the mere sight of him.

Looking back I can see these things, but all we knew then was that Jim had fucked up, and that when Colin recovered he would repay that beating with interest. We also knew that nobody had ever protected Jim or Maisie from Colin, and so we had no reason to believe that anyone ever would. We were just frightened kids, and with the failure of the adults in our lives to protect us there's really no surprise that we ended up running away.

* * *

Jim's people didn't seem surprised when we arrived. They were related to him by some convoluted family line and they accepted us without any complaint or question. On the way there Jim had explained how they were related, but it had gone a bit over my head to be honest. That night we slept in a big swag out on the back veranda, smelling the warm body smell left by numerous other occupants, doing our best not to touch one another as we slept.

It sounds a bit obvious to say, but that house was not a very wholesome environment for anyone, let alone two teenage boys. There was a large midden of empty stubbies out back, which from time to time the council would come and clear away. There were also harder drugs in the house: strong hydroponic grass, or dirty speed, and often heroin of various levels of purity. There was even glue or paint or thinners if the going was lean.

I smoked some weed on that first night and I got queasy and paranoid, eventually throwing up in the compost heap with the potatoes staring balefully at me. I stayed pretty straight after that, drinking a bit but even then getting that queasy feeling like I was on the deck of a ship. I was reticent but Jim took to it hammer and tongs. He smoked and snorted and drank with such eagerness that he was soon told he had to pay his way, and when he said he had no money they sent him on delivery runs and pickups and within a fortnight he was cutting and bagging and gouging price rises out of the stupid white boys who craved what he was peddling. His uncles told him that he was safe because he was a minor, and even as they used him they were also quite proud of his acumen for their business.

Jim was pretty keen for me to use but I resisted, preferring to watch television with his seventeen-year-old niece. I was flattered to the point of blushing by the attention she gave me. I did try some glue but it just gave me a headache, and I snorted a little speed but it was a pretty nasty high, and it mostly just kept me awake for two days despite my desperate efforts to sleep.

Jim was into everything but his first and only love was heroin. He wanted me to try it, but the idea of injecting was a bit frightening to me, and I had also heard a story on my second day there about a kid who had dropped during a deal, and their frantic efforts to keep him alive. They left before the ambulance was called, so I don't know the end of that story, but I do have the image of him, immobile and blue, his eyes rolled back in his head, unresponsive to their slaps and their

shouting. It did nothing to discourage Jim, but I am not ashamed to admit that it frightened the shit out of me.

* * *

The house was very much a drug house, full of violence and the constant threat of violence, so I was not surprised when there was a loud hammering at the door one Friday afternoon. Jim slouched out to answer it, and when he did turn the handle the door was flung wide, and something really terrifying strode into the living room.

It was Dad. He had finally swallowed his pride and gone around to Jim's house, and interrogated Maisie until she told him where we might be. My Dad was a big man, and he swelled up when he was angry, so that you couldn't see around him to look for an escape. And here he was now, very large indeed, righteous in the midst of the squalor, and as he looked around I saw the pipes and foils and all of that vileness, and I felt his disgust with me also. I thought he might start thundering and smashing things, but instead he just breathed out and slumped forward, his arms spreading wide towards the room. Nate, he said. Is this what you want? He was silent then, and he looked at me. I was also silent, and he looked around and shook his head, and told me very quietly to get in the car, that I was coming home.

I got straight up from the couch and walked over towards him. Jim started to remonstrate with me, but Dad's fury rushed back into him instantly and he pointed his finger at Jim and said something harsh to him that stopped him in his tracks. You Shut The Fuck Up. Now Jim had known the petulance and violence of an abusive man, but this was a terrible, righteous fury and it scared the absolute shit out of him. Dad glowered while I walked past him and out of the door, and I heard him say a couple of further things before he followed me out to the car.

Apart from telling me to put my seatbelt on, Dad was silent all the way back home to the farm. I sat for three hours in silence, willing myself to say just one thing, and perhaps to ask whether we could go back for Jim. But I was a coward and I abandoned my friend and I just sat there trying not to tremble with fear or to cry with relief. There was no radio, no talk, just road noise and silence and me feeling relieved and terrified at the same time, and as I sped back to safety I left Jim abandoned in that house where there were far worse things than silence.

* * *

We drove into our place late in the afternoon, with the last of the mild spring sunshine lighting the tips of the pines. Mum and Ruthie were still out in the garden, and they stood there with their hands on their hips looking very disapproving, but once Dad had gone inside their aspect softened and they both came over and hugged me, keeping one eye out for Dad all the time. Ruthie told me that they were all very angry at me for running away, but that they were also very glad that I was back safely home again. Mum just grabbed me tight and stroked my hair and said my name, over and over, and made me promise that I would never do anything like that to them again.

Mum and Ruth may have forgiven me, but Dad would not speak to me or look at me for the rest of the weekend. I spent my time skulking around, trying to stay out of his way. At mealtimes he was silent and stared at the table, rather than talk to me, and during the day he went outside and I knew better than to follow him. I tried to be as useful as I could, drying up after meals, or helping out in the garden, but it seemed to make no difference. I was trying to buy back my reputation, but all I got was sore knees and broken fingernails as I grubbed around after weeds.

On Sunday evening over dinner Dad finally spoke. He cleared his throat and announced himself, saying: I have some things to say. And without waiting for our permission he spoke coolly and deliberately, and this is more or less what he said.

He said: Nate has been a bloody fool, but he is not the only one. I am also to blame for what has happened. I brought him down to this part of the country and I should have known what to expect. He said something about the race card, something I did not really understand, and he said that such things were no concern of his. He said that we were going to go back to the city, and that I would go to a proper school, and that he could think about living in the country when my education was complete. He said he was sorry for Mum and Ruthie but I needed priority now, and that we would all have to make sacrifices for that. I blurted out that I was sorry, and he said not to waste time on that, because being sorry never got a man anywhere. He also said that he wanted me to grow up and shoulder my responsibilities, and he looked at me intently and said: you know what that means.

When he had finished speaking he looked at Mum and Ruthie and asked for their support, and they both said yes instantly. Dad reminded Ruthie about her horse, and Ruth said that Spirit could live at the Johnsons with their horse Beau. Dad said that he would have to ask them but Ruthie said she knew they would say yes, because Spirit and Beau were like family.

I went back to school the next day, thinking about Ruthie's horse and Mum's garden and basically feeling terrible that I was going to screw that up for them. There was nothing I could do to change that, though, so I did my best to apply myself at school, and in the afternoons and on the weekends and I did homework and went to aths training and split firewood and wondered about Jimmy Farmer. I half hoped to walk in to class one day and see him there, his lean frame tucked behind a desk, with some words of friendly abuse for me, or a demonstration of some new boxing combination he had worked out for himself. But I did not see him return. I looked for him a couple of times once from a train to the city, because he would sometimes hang out and deal at the station, but I did not see him there either. I suppose I knew that wasn't a good sign, but I didn't know what I could do to make it any better.

* * *

Over that summer we moved back to the city, into a house that was close to a lot of the good schools in Melbourne. It was a small tidy Californian bungalow on a nice big block, and there were citrus trees and stone fruit trees, a vegetable garden, and a nice ornamental front yard with roses and a tiny Japanese maple. Mum and Ruthie made the most of it, and they liked to get the tram down to the junction for coffee and shopping, and also our regular trips out for dinner. I didn't mind it either, although I knew that the main reason I was there was so that I could do my last two years of school at Xavier.

I don't know what my father did to get me in to that school. On my application forms he wrote out my given names in full, Ignatius Loyola, which might have held some sway with the Jesuits, and it probably also helped that some of his friends were old Xaverians, especially one very kind-hearted man who was counsel to the board.

And there was running. When I met the principal he seemed primarily interested in my athletic ability, both on the track and on the football field. He was stern about my academic potential, saying that this school had higher expectations than a country school, and that I would need to apply myself simply to get by. No

one mentioned the colour of my skin, although I fancied that I could see eyes dart between my parents and me like they always did, trying to work out the colour differential. But there was never any explicit talk, and I was happy to have it ignored.

I started the following February. It was a shock being in such an enthusiastic learning environment, but I soon began to enjoy it and I even did reasonably well. I found out quickly that these severe priests valued excellence above all other things, and that my identity at the school was going to be shaped by my ability to excel at something and not by the colour of my skin. Rumours were already circulating that I was fast, and after my first aths training I had at least a dozen senior guys come right up to me and ask me what my events were, and what PBs I had run, and when I told them my times they rubbed their hands and chortled, and I was proud and apprehensive all at the same time. I knew I could run but I didn't want to let them down.

The pressure was on to perform and I had been training hard, and I got some decent coaching for the first time in my life. I was selected for the APS sports carnival, which turned out to be a very big deal indeed. I started well and won the 200m heat and then the final, and that drove our crowd wild, and then they went totally apeshit when I won the 400m final by a fairly long stretch. The next day at school I was like a movie star: little kids came up to me to shake my hand, and prefects slapped me on the back and told me that I was the best thing to ever happen to the school, mimicking my loose-armed style and calling me black magic and black lightning and all of that sort of stuff.

That was the way, at that school. Excel in any area, especially sports, and you could be any colour under the sun and you would still be feted and admired. In that sense you were what you could do, no more and no less, and I saw some of the reason that Dad had been so keen to get me in there.

I would be understating it to say that Dad was pleased when I won those two events. He had taken calls all afternoon praising my efforts, and when he got home that evening he hugged me like I was little again. Over dinner he wanted to hear about every step I had taken, and even as I exceeded myself to tell every detail he brought me back and back again. He opened a special bottle of wine in celebration, and loudly proclaimed that it was a blessing to have me as his son, and as he got tipsy he swelled up even more and challenged heaven to show him a better boy than me, if such a boy could exist. Mum took the bottle away and told him no more for you, and he protested and said: it is my son Ignatius that I am drunk on. And he did not quiet down for a very long while.

I was glad to make Dad so happy, even though he was careful to say that he would be just as proud of me if I had not won, so long as I had given it my best. And he said that this was what would make me into a man, to always give things a red-hot go no matter what the outcome might be, even those things I was not especially good at. Mum spent the whole night smiling at me and feeding me and trying to get Dad to quiet down a bit, lest he scare Ruthie or have a heart attack or both. But Ruthie seemed to be enjoying the commotion, and she got up a number of times to hug me for being, as she said, the fastest runner in the world.

Then there was football, when the winter rolled around. My pace gave me a huge natural advantage, and I would just grab the ball down back somewhere, run like hell along the wing until I was in range of the goal square, and then kick it as long as I could. When our forwards saw me with the ball they knew what was coming, and as I ran and ran they would head to the goal square for the inevitable marking contest. It was old-fashioned football but the crowd lapped it up: me burning up the field, and then our big forwards jostling and leaping for a contested mark. Sometimes I would kick the ball so long that it would fly right

over their heads, sometimes even splitting the posts for a goal, and that always drove our section of the crowd particularly wild.

The opposition were usually too slow to catch me, but at stoppages they would rough me up a bit, calling me a black cunt or a c--n or whatever names they could dream up in their ignorant footballer brains. It never went for too long though, because my own guys would pull them off me, and chime in with some insults of their own. It felt good to have them stand up for me, and thanks to Jim I knew that I could look after myself well enough if it ever came to that.

Dad always came to watch me play and he loved seeing me out there, even though he knew the sort of shit I was copping. It made him angry, especially when he heard it in the crowd, but all he ever said to me was: they do it because you're good, Nate. He said that if I were rubbish, they wouldn't bother with me, and so I should take it as a compliment and go on running rings around them. I suppose that if my skin was white they would have mocked me for my red hair, or my height, or my teeth, or God forbid my sister or my mother. As Dad said: you should worry if you stop being abused. That means you need to wake up and get back into the game.

I know it sounds lame, but this advice helped me to turn racism into a backhanded compliment, and I learned to thrive on it rather than let it get to me. And all of this was before the racial abuse scandals of the mid-nineties, and the reformation of people's attitudes towards that sort of vilification. Now racial abuse will get you thrown out of stadiums, and earn you a stiff fine, and even get you banned for life. It is amazing how quickly things can improve.

My status as an athlete and footballer gave me serious social cred, and I was invited to parties that I really had no business being at. There were luminous blonde girls from expensive schools milling around the house of whatever parent was away, and everyone drinking and becoming hilarious and then eventually pairing up, leaving me sipping Coke and flipping through coffee table books. Sometimes a girl would go out of her way to talk to me, and I did my best to be entertaining, but I was mostly afraid of these interactions, and the fact that I would break out in a sweat under the pressure did not help much. There was one girl I met a few times who was kind of tough and cool and who made me feel at ease, but even she ended up going off with some tall assured guy, leaving me to wonder what I needed to do to have a girl choose me, and what that would entail, and of course what I would do if that ever were to happen.

I came a long way in a very short time, and it left me feeling estranged from my life down in the country, almost as if it had been something I had imagined or dreamed. I would occasionally think of my old life, raking it up from my memory, and sometimes I would spare Jim a thought and wonder what had become of him, in the time since I had seen him. I thought of him and I wished the best for him, but mostly I was fully engaged in my new life, and all of those things including Jim quickly faded back into the past.

* * *

I have come to feel more and more remorse for the forgetting that I did back then. I know that I might have intervened in Jim's sad trajectory by making more of an effort, back then when it really counted. But I did not intervene, or ask Dad to help, and so I neglected my friend badly and badly let him down, even as I was given the absolute best of everything. And if that has led to disaster, then I must be man enough to shoulder at least some of the blame.

I have pieced together a little of Jim's life during that time while I was finishing my schooling in the city. Where I had opportunity to learn, and in some things to

excel, he had the opportunity to steal and fight and bang things up his arm that sometimes got him high but were also likely to make him sick or even kill him. I know that he and his mates would steal cars and drive them to the city, leaving them when they ran out of fuel, aggressively begging for change to get them a train fare back home. I know that he grew thin and tall and angry, and that he had girlfriends he would fuck and sometimes hit (he has told me this, to his shame) and once or twice impregnate and then abandon, leaving an entire fucking mess of pain and poverty and destitution in his wake.

That was his life. He burgled houses to get money for drugs, and just for kicks he rolled private school kids for their basketball shoes and whatever pittance they might have in their pockets. He sold drugs to those very same schoolkids, and gained favour with a fairly big supplier and ran various errands for him, which usually involved intimidation or violence proportionate to the offence that was being repaid. I know that he injured and possibly even killed people, like the time he came crashing though someone's lounge room widows in leathers and a motorcycle helmet, dealing skull-crushing blows with the claw hammers that he held, one in each hand.

I know some things about his life at that time but I am not going to speculate further about them, because if there is any ultimate justice then Jim has probably already answered for these things, and been able to plead any mitigating circumstances or later atonement for them. I only mention them to demonstrate that while my life was privileged and even blessed, his was more or less the opposite: brutal, impoverished, more or less a nightmare ending usually in death. That Jim managed to escape that fate, at least for as long as he did, shows something of the strength of the man, or rather of the child he still was during that time.

* * *

I finished school in the late 80's, just as fashion began to recover a little bit from the craziness of that decade. I had two wonderful years at Xavier, especially in sport, and I did reasonably well in my final exams. I was never going to be top of my class, because like me with aths and footy, the school had recruited academically too. There were some freakishly talented guys in my year, and they breezed through without any apparent effort and on that field I was never going to match them. I got by mostly on the fact that I had a decent memory, and so I learned poems and quotes to adorn my essays in literature and history, and I ended up doing reasonably well.

Dad had seen me work hard and he was very pleased with my results, and so he took the family out to a celebratory dinner at a grand old dame of a place in the city. He made a long speech about how proud I had made him in every aspect of my life over the last couple of years, and he said that I deserved my success and only had to ask for anything that I needed. I suggested a car, and as we all laughed Dad said that there was no need to go overboard. But the next week there was a reasonably tidy old sedan in the driveway. You deserve it, he said, and he tossed me the keys and told me to start her up, and with those keys in the ignition he took me out for my first driving lesson that day, despite that fact that I had not yet qualified for my learner's permit. He was funny that way: all serious law-abiding citizen, and then suddenly going nuts whenever he was pleased about something.

Over the summer I was accepted into Melbourne Uni to study law, via the special indigenous intake program. I felt a bit bad about it, because it felt a bit like I was sneaking in, but Dad was very stern about that. He told me that other people have all sorts of privileges that I have not had, and that it all works out in the long run. He also told me that there was a very strong need to promote

education among indigenous people, to give their community strong leaders and role models. He told me: just make sure that you repay the investment in you. That's what actually matters. So I took the place, and there was another dinner to celebrate, and this time I was allowed a glass of wine, and Dad asked me to make a speech, telling me that I had better learn how to do it properly now that I was going to be talking for a living.

So I headed off to University. In those days it was still quite an exciting place to be. The Federal Government had only just introduced a fee system, after 20 years of free tertiary education, and there was still a radical base of student activism that was engaged enough to protest it. During orientation week mounted police rode on to campus to break up a blockade, and students threw ball bearings and marbles under the feet of the horses and brought them crashing down. The government remained unmoved, and fees became tolerated and then the norm. We aren't America yet, but people can now buy their way into any university in the country, and education is one of the largest industries in the Australian economy. And because it is so expensive the radicals have all but disappeared, leaving life there a desolate expanse of button-down shirts and career aspirations, with no protests over anything more controversial than burnt lattes in the cafeteria.

Back then, though, University was still fun. I knew a few guys from school who were studying with me, and we recruited a few girls to hang out with us on the south lawn over the sunny autumn afternoons. Actually I think they may have recruited us, but the end result was the same. I grew my hair long at the front, and I bought a few waistcoats, and I wore the same pair of brown hiking boots every day until they rotted out and I then bought an identical pair. We talked about Foucault and feminism without very much understanding, but it seemed to annoy the conservative students which we all really enjoyed. Some afternoons we would head down to the botanical gardens to drink some wine in the sun, and we would end up lying all over each other and giggling and telling ourselves how Bloomsbury we were.

I played football for the University Blues, and although I didn't do a proper preseason I could rely on my natural pace and I did tolerably well. The Old Xavs were upset that I had abandoned them, and when we played there I copped a lot of stick from the same supporters who used to cheer me on. You Black Bastard and all of that. That cut me a bit, to be honest, and that abuse plus the abuse that I copped at every other ground really took the enjoyment out of playing. Dad asked me about it one day, and I told him that I was pretty much over it, and though I expected him to scold me he just nodded and said: it's no tragedy. Your studies are the important thing. Football is for schoolboys, not for men. He told me that I should play the season out, and then just give it away, if that was what I wanted to do.

So that was the end of football. I did consider athletics for a while, but there were many lonely yards to run, and I never quite got around to looking up a decent coach. There was plenty to keep me busy, with study and my social life, and I chose to take the easy path and gave running away too. I do sometimes regret that, especially around the Olympics, until I think: what are the odds, really, of winning at that level? With injury, and all that psychology, and the absolute limits of talent? And while I do think about it occasionally and imagine what might have been, for the most part I sleep pretty well at night, even if do I sometimes dream of running.

* * *

After final exams that year we all took the bus down to Lorne. We stayed at our friend Kate's place, and we drank cheap wine and a couple of good bottles stolen

from various parental cellars, and although we fussed over the good wine they all drank pretty much the same, and they all got us equally buzzed. We hung out in the spa in various states of undress and luxuriated in one another's company, feeling like debauched turn of the century poets, complete with outlandish hair and our half-understood ideas.

Even at that late stage I had never had a proper girlfriend, but then I had never met anyone like Mary. She had only just started hanging around with us, after splitting with her previous boyfriend, and all I knew about her was that she was pretty fierce and not to be messed with. I had seen her stride out of the law library one time with a thunderous look on her face, walk right up to her ex and slap him hard across the face, sitting him down on his ass. After that I found her a bit intimidating, but she seemed very mellow that weekend, and she seemed to be particularly interested in talking to me.

The last evening of that stay we all got stupendously drunk, on spirits as well as wine. Mary and I wound up talking on the couch, and she kept giggling and telling me that she liked the colour of my skin. She eventually asked me whether she could touch it, and I don't need to provide any other details about that night, save to say that she ended my innocence in the most emphatic way. The next morning I was bleary and awkward, but she came up to me at the breakfast bar and put her feet between my feet and her head into the hollow of my neck. We rode the bus back towards town with her head like that on my shoulder, and we were also coiled together on the train, with the others glancing at us and giggling. Her dad picked her up at the bus station, and grudgingly offered me a ride, but I did not like the way he avoided my eyes. Besides I wanted to ride the tram so that I could re-live the intimacy of the night before, and cement it in my memory before I arrived home.

I was elated until I reached the end of our street, and I saw all of the cars parked on our verge and how there were far too many cars. I was struck cold from the inside out and I began to run towards the house. I sprinted down through the side gate and pulled open the back door, and the ghastly expressions on the faces that turned to me told me that someone had died, and when Mum fell against me sobbing I knew who it was. Everything new and good went out of me and I felt nothing but her grip and her gasping against me. I looked around at the ashen faces of her family, at Dad's brother Mick shaking his head, and I knew that my father was gone.

* * *

The next few days were awful. I called Andre to let him know what had happened, and he told the group and they organised a huge bouquet of flowers. Mary came over as soon as she heard, and there were tears in her eyes when she looked at me, and when she told Mum how sorry she was for her loss. Mum smiled weakly at me and said has he been hiding you and Mary said yes, he is a bit sneaky that way. Mary sat with me right through those days, and though she would cry just to look at me sometimes she never once gave me grief about the fact that I shed no tears. Looking back I still have no tears, and that may be because I know that my father would not want me to cry over him. What good does it do? he would ask. He would simply want me to stand in his shoes, and look after his little family, and I am sure he would also say: I'll see you again, Nate. There's no cause for tears. Just make sure you look after your Mum and your sister until I see you again.

Mick was the executor of Dad's will, and there were explicit instructions about how he wanted the funeral to be conducted. It was very brief, and there was no music, because Dad thought that music only makes people more emotional at an already fraught time. There was a speech for Mick to read out, which was chiefly

addressed to Mum and Ruth and me. He spoke of his absolute love for each one of us, and he spoke to us one by one, and for me there was a special reminder that I was the man of the family now, and that it was my job to look after my mother and my sister and ensure that no harm came to them. I do not fear to go, he said, because I leave my son to take care of things in my stead. Only because he has been gifted to us can I now rest in peace.

The speech drew tears all round, even one or two from Mick, but Dad was adamant that this should not be a maudlin affair. In the last part of the speech he thanked everyone for being a part of his life, and he then told people to get stuck in to his whisky, if they liked to drink, and told us to have some rejoicing that we have known each other and loved each other, even for such a short time. When Mick read that part of the speech people wiped their eyes and even laughed a little, and that afternoon Dad's whisky got an absolute hammering. People cried and told stories and laughed and ended up in each others arms, laughing and crying all at the same time. And I should probably take this opportunity to say: I would wish to go out in exactly the same way.

* * *

I would say that things went back to normal, because that's what people said they would do, but things were changed and nothing was ever again the way it used to be. Ruthie and I were careful to spend time with Mum, and to help her wherever we could, but her grief was profound and far beyond consolation. She looked more and more drawn every week, and I could see that she was losing weight even though she denied it. She also began having severe panic attacks, and those could not be hidden. She became fearful of leaving the house, and I watched the little tics she developed become more and more compulsive and consuming. I'm not sure how much Ruthie noticed, but I eventually intervened, and I told Mum that it might be a good idea for her to see a psychiatrist. She burst into tears when I told her that, and told me that she didn't want to be a burden, and that she did not think anything could help her because her heart was broken beyond repair. She also wondered why God had taken Dad and left her, when it was clear that he was the strong one, and she hated being left alone.

I was naive in those days and I thought that a psychiatrist would perhaps talk with Mum, and see her through this period with some advice and therapy, and maybe something to help her sleep. Instead she was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, and a constellation of other related conditions, and she was prescribed a drug that in those days was quite new and even a bit experimental. She took the pills but they only made her worse, and she started to have serious suicidal ideation that would not relent, and one day she swallowed her whole bottle of pills. She told me straight away and we got her to hospital, and the next day she seemed much better and was apologising profusely for being so silly. The hospital discharged her but after a couple of days she seemed overtaken by her grief again and she stopped eating and drinking, and although she swore that nothing was wrong I knew she was far too wasted already to keep on like this for long.

I hated to go behind her back but I called Mick to discuss my concerns, and on his advice I called the area psych triage team and told them that I thought she was still very much in danger. They grumbled a bit, and asked me whether I thought I was overreacting, but they eventually came and spoke with her and made her eat a little in their presence, and told her that they would come every day for a week just to see how she was doing. She would apologise profusely to anyone who would listen, and eventually they stopped coming and told me that it was just grief and that we would just have to wait for it to pass.

* * *

I did my best to look after Mum but she began to fail in alarming ways, and she became more and more skeletal. When university started again I spoke to a counsellor there who was very understanding, and she arranged it so that I could defer for a semester. Mum was in and out of hospital with worsening symptoms, owing to stress and malnutrition, until her doctor told me that she needed constant care for the indefinite future, and that she would be confined to a special hospice or hospital unit or whatever it was. She went to this creepy white place on a hill that had once been run by nuns, and when I visited her she began crying and said that she just wanted to be at home, so that she could go peacefully, and she said she knew I was a good boy and that I would get her out of this place and bring her home.

I told her that she needed to be there, so that she could get better, but she did not stop crying and begging me to let her come home. It was heartbreaking to hear her, and I was mostly heartbroken at the fact that I was causing my mother such pain. I tried to imagine what Dad would do, and I saw him striding off home with her frail in his arms, looking back and saying to me: this is your mother, Nate, who took you in and loved you and nourished you. You should protect her, and be obedient to her, no matter what you think of the rights and wrongs of her wishes.

That night I did not sleep much, and the next day I went straight to her bedside, and despite the protestations of the nurses I carried her gently out to the car and brought her home. As I carried her she smiled softly at me and said you're such a good boy, and over the next few days when I asked her what she needed she would say: just an ice block, for my dry mouth. I looked after her for a week or so, with Ruthie helping me where she could, until Mum frowned and said that both of us were looking peaky, and she told me to take Ruthie down to the junction for a coffee and a look around the shops. So we went and poked around half-heartedly, and Ruthie bought a silk-look scarf for Mum, and when we returned our mother was quiet, with no expression on her face but with a great sense of presence and peace within the room, as if she was lingering there to enjoy the fact of her release, and perhaps to reassure us and say goodbye, before she moved on to a better place altogether. I had thought of this moment and worried about Ruth, but she just went very quiet, and she draped the scarf gently about mum's neck, and then the two of us stood there hand in hand until the room became empty of that lovely presence and our mother was gone.

I called Mick and he told me he was sorry, and he also told me that he would take care of the arrangements. He was very good and soon there was another funeral, much more sombre this time, and soon the house was left with just me and Ruthie in it, turned to the sad task of burying our last remaining parent, with me just gone nineteen, and the sole guardian and provider for us both.

At the funeral people hugged us and said that it was better this way, better for your mother this way. I was numb and accepted their kind words, over tea and sandwiches, but I wondered what could be better about our lives this way, with both parents lost and we two still so young to bear it.

* * *

After Dad passed away Mary had spent a lot of time at our place, and we made up a room that she could call hers. After Mum passed she moved in to my bedroom, and from that point on she more or less lived with Ruthie and me. Ruthie loved her without any reservation, and I loved her too, although things were often complicated between us, and there were frequent harsh words and cold spells. She was surprisingly domesticated, for someone with her politics,

and between the three of us we managed to cook and clean and generally look after ourselves tolerably well.

I got by OK but I worried about Ruthie, who was very distressed about losing Mum and Dad in such a short time. I didn't quite know how to explain it to her, but Mary had no such hesitation. She told Ruthie that Dad was needed for a job up in heaven, and that Mum had gone there too because she was missing him so badly. Ruthie said that she wanted to go too, but Mary said that she was needed on earth to look after me, and also that there might be some other job that needed doing that would keep her down here. God will call you when it's time, she said. Ruthie asked me whether I was going to go to heaven too, and I said: no, not if I could help it. You're stuck with me I guess. Ruthie smiled gravely and said she didn't mind, as long as we were together, and she said that she was quite glad that Mum and Dad were now together as well.

One thing we didn't have to worry about was money. Dad had owned the house outright, and had invested fairly well in stocks, and he also had a substantial life insurance policy that paid out in full. Mick helped me sort those money matters, and we were left with a place to live and a decent income to see us through for as long as we needed it. The older I get the more I appreciate that, because life can get lean and hard when you are constantly grubbing around to find a few dollars.

I toyed with the idea of quitting uni and buying a farm somewhere, which I thought would be especially good for Ruthie. I eventually asked her about it, and she said that she liked living in the city better than the country because of the clothes shops, and the nice places to have coffee and cake. I reminded her about Spirit and she said: Spirit is happy where she is. Mick was very keen for me to keep studying, and I knew that Dad would have been too, so I decided to have the rest of the year off and then go back to it. I ended up really enjoying the time that I had that year: hanging out with Mary and Ruthie, out in the garden or around town somewhere, or doing some fixing up of the house. We decided to paint it, inside and out, which turned out to be fun, although Ruthie and I had some disagreements over the colour scheme. Mary had a better eye than both of us, and we ended up following her suggestions: green and cream outside, yellow for the kitchen, and Ruthie's room whatever colour she wanted, which turned out to be aquamarine. She also put up some decals of mermaids and starfish, which went perfectly in the blue-green depths of the room, and also some unicorns that she told me were special ones that could live underwater.

The next year I went back to university, a bit rusty from my break, and I struggled a bit to adapt to it. I had fitted well with criminal law in my first year, but the civil law subjects that I was studying in second year left me very cold. I already knew that I wanted to practice criminal law, and all of those other subjects seemed just like wasted time. Mary helped me, and I had the benefit of her notes and summaries, but I eventually got pretty lean marks in my end of year exams.

For Christmas both Ruth and I were invited to Mary's place, and while her Dad was strained and strangely formal, especially with me, her mother was very hospitable to us. Ruth had a reasonable time, but on the way home she told me that she was sadder on Christmas Day than any other day, and I told her that Mum and Dad would also be sad, thinking of us and missing us during Christmas in heaven.

Over New Year the three of us went down to Mick's beach house and his family were very welcoming, helping us to forget our own loneliness for a while. Every night after dinner we would throw a blanket over the table for a game of Texas Holdem, and with ten dollars to buy in you ended up winning pretty big, if you

ever got that far. Ruthie dropped out quickly in her first game, and she sulked a bit, but I enticed her back to the table by saying that we would play as a team. We ended up winning the next night, and I have never seen her so happy, counting her fortune over and over again while everyone else lamented their losses.

It was always fun down there. Mornings we slept late, and in the afternoons we would rig up Mick's catamaran and go tearing up and down the blue water just off the beach, fast in the fresh southerlies that would blow all afternoon. Ruthie was petrified to begin with but Mick was a very good skipper, and by the end of our stay she was out near horizontal in the trapeze, her free hand touching the waves, yelling for the boat to go faster and especially up on one hull.

We eventually left for the city some time in the middle of January. We arrived home in the middle of the afternoon, and while I was unpacking the car I heard a scream from the front of the house that froze my blood. I sprinted around the side of the house to find Ruth staring and pointing at a motley jumble of bags on the veranda, as well as a sleeping bag that was stretched out there on the hard boards. She was sure that they belonged to a robber, but I told her that it was probably just some poor person who didn't have a home, sleeping there under cover and out of the wind and the rain. Ruthie thought about that for a while, as she calmed down, and she said that we should let the poor person stay there if they had nowhere else to go, and I said that we would see what help we could give them once we found out what they needed.

I had a sneaking suspicion about the identity of that poor person, and sure enough, less than an hour later, I was standing in that exact spot talking to Jimmy Farmer.

He told me that he had found out where I lived from our old neighbours down in Lindenow, and that he had come to see me to say hello and maybe to escape his life for a while. He had been on the porch for three nights, popping up to the milk bar every so often for a sandwich or a chocolate bar. He told me that he was glad we came home when we did, as his money had run out yesterday, and it was going to be a hungry wait for us from that point on. I brought him inside and introduced him to Mary, and he shook her hand gravely and said it was a pleasure. Ruthie gave him a hug and asked him whether he had been cold out there, or frightened of the dark. He said no, but told her that he had been pretty hungry. She disappeared and soon came back with a jam sandwich, just as she liked it, with the crusts cut off and plenty of butter to make it taste good. He thanked her and gulped the sandwich down, and she giggled and went to make him another.

I was a bit less kind. I told him that he reeked, and he smiled and agreed with me and I handed him a towel. I told him where the shower was, and I also told him that he could borrow some of my clothes if he needed to. I was still relatively slim back then, but he was an absolute scarecrow, and when he was gone Mary asked me if he had always been so slight. I said no, and that I had an idea why he was so skinny, and her eyes widened and she said: drugs? I told her that I could not be sure, but that I would find out after he had finished in the shower. She looked concerned and I told her: if he's using we can't have him here. Let's just find out what the story is, before we do anything else.

I went to put his bag of clothes in the laundry but Ruth had beaten me to it, and I found her stuffing his clothes into the washing machine. Jim eventually came downstairs looking much more human, even if my things were a couple of sizes too big. I got us the last two beers in the fridge and we sat down on the front steps, and he spoke lean sentences to my full ones, staring out over the unmown buffalo grass to the leafy street beyond. I told him what had happened to Dad,

and then to Mum, and he told me he was very sorry and that my folks were good people, and that I was lucky to have had them.

He sipped at the beer and eventually got up and poured it out on the lawn, saying that he had no stomach for it anymore. He sat down again and was silent for a while and then he told me the real reason that he had come to see me. He said the life he was living had become untenable, although he may not have used that exact word. His boss Aaron was a hard man, and he had been getting more and more tired of Jim. When you use and you deal you eventually fuck up, and Jim told me that he had finally fucked up in a really big way. Aaron was done with him, and very angry besides, and Jim knew that things would soon get very ugly for him. Some guys had come to see him see him last week and they were seriously bad guys, and they had said: you need to disappear, Jim, or we will make that happen. Jim had himself delivered such messages himself in the past, and he knew what they meant and that they were not messing around. Even though it was late he parcelled up what drugs and money he could, along with his gear, and he walked to the train station and caught a train into the city. He shot up in the railway toilets, and so missed the last tram to our place, and in soaking cold rain he walked down the tramlines for two or three hours until he found the stop he wanted, and then took a left and then a right and found our house in complete darkness. And he found it empty, unfortunately, until right now.

Jim finished the story, and he was silent.

I asked him how much he was using. He shrugged and told me that he was using enough, enough to make it a problem. I asked him some more questions about it and he was evasive and he eventually told me that the details did not matter. I asked about rehab and he shook his head and said: haven't you heard that joke? Rehab is for quitters. He smiled weakly and then leaned forward with his hands shoved between his knees, and I saw again how wasted he was and how little of him there was left.

I was about to tell him that we couldn't have him if he was using, but he then told me why he had come. He had seen a documentary about Miles Davis, of all people, and it told the story of how he had kicked heroin. Miles was using and he had seen too many people die from it, so he went back to his parent's place and locked himself into a room above their barn. He sweated and cramped and was terribly dope-sick, alone in that room, but after seven days he emerged and embraced his parents and told them it was over.

Jim told me all of this, and then he told me that he was also ready to give it up, and that he wanted to do it cold turkey, and that there was nowhere else for him to go. He asked me to lock him in a room, and to bring him water and aspirin, and not to let him out until it was over. Until he was through this fucking shit, so he said, and he had his life back again.

And he was silent again.

I told Jim that I would have to speak with Mary and Ruth before I said anything else, and he said that he understood, and he told me he was going to have a lie down if that was OK. I showed him to the attic room, and he fell face-forward on to the bed, grabbing and folding the pillow up under the side of his face. He didn't say anything else, and I shut the door and went downstairs as quietly as I could.

I told Mary about what Jim wanted to do, and although she was supportive she thought that we should have a doctor visit, just to keep an eye on him. We don't need any more death in this house, so she said. She also told me that her cousin

was a detox nurse, and that withdrawal can get very dangerous if you're not careful. I was anxious about what to tell Ruthie, but Mary sat her down and told her that Jim had been taking a lot of bad medicine that was not good for him, and that it made him sick, and that we were going to help him to stop taking it. Ruth took the news very calmly, and even when I told her that Jim might get angry or noisy she just said that if Jim was sick we should help him to get better.

That evening when Jim emerged I told him that we were going to help him, and he was grateful like I had never seen him before. He was adamant that he should not be allowed to leave the room, and at his insistence I fitted a little latch to the outside of his door, and I gave him a big school bell that Dad had picked up at a trash and treasure somewhere, so that he could get our attention if he needed it. He asked me to write out the rules of his confinement, which he then copied out in his own handwriting and signed, before sticking it the wall next to his bed. His commitment was to stay in the house for ten full days, regardless of how well he might think he was, and Mary and I agreed that one of us would be present at all times to make sure that he did not leave. Jim then built a fire in the lounge room fireplace, and with his hands already a bit shaky he threw all of his fits and foils and bags into the fire, and the four of us sat in there late into the evening, drinking tea. Eventually Jim said he was beginning to feel a bit average and I followed him upstairs, deadlocked the windows in his room, and he lay down on the bed with his bottles of Lucozade and water and he told me he was ready. I told him that I admired what he was doing, and he told me not to be too hasty about that because he was likely to become very unpleasant to deal with. I told him that I could handle it and he just said: don't be too sure about that.

I closed and locked the door and went downstairs. The three of us went back to drinking tea in the lounge room, staring into the fire, and we spoke only a handful of words for the rest of the evening. Mary wanted to know whether the latch was really necessary, and I told her that Jim wanted it that way and that I actually hadn't latched it, just fumbled with it to make it sound locked. She smiled at me and I also told her that the latch would break anyway if he battered the door, and that it was a psychological barrier rather than a real one. Ruthie said that locking Jim up made her feel sad, and I told her that it was only for a little while, and that we were only pretending anyway and that he always could get out if he wanted to.

For the next week and a half the three of us did little more than wait around the house. Jim looked pretty awful for the first couple of days, with chills and stomach cramps and what he called kicky legs, but it was less intense than I had imagined. We gave him chicken soup and aspirin and Lucozade and white toast with Vegemite and he picked up pretty quickly. After four days he told me that the door probably didn't need to be locked anymore, and I just nodded and left it unlatched as usual, and the day after that we saw him downstairs looking for a bit of dinner. He was still a bit pale and sweaty but he felt much better, he said, and he made a small speech telling us all how much he appreciated our help and how much he owed us for getting him clean again and coming back to life. Ruthie walked over and gave him a hug and told him that he had to stay alive because God needed him here, and all he had to do was find out what job he was here for and everything would be fine. He smiled a weak smile and said he looked forward to finding that out.

Mary had been making some enquiries with her cousin, the AOD nurse and counsellor, and she said that a proper residential rehabilitation program would be a good idea for Jim, especially for the first few months of being clean. Jim was initially hesitant about the idea, but at our insistence he let us drive him down to a therapeutic community on a small farm about an hour or so from town. It was a pretty setting, and the counsellors were all very friendly, and Jim was especially impressed that a few of them had been addicts themselves. He decided that he

would give it a go, at least for a couple of months. Mary told him that the program would help make it stick, and Jim said that he wanted it to stick. He did not intend to experience withdrawal again, he said, and in any event he was going to need a place to stay.

A few days later we drove down to the farm again, this time with what stuff Jim had packed up in the boot of the car. We arrived in bright sunshine after a heavy shower of rain, and we all gasped at the brilliant double rainbow to the East and Jim said that he supposed that must be a sign. We all hugged him goodbye, one by one, and I told him there was always a room for him at our place if he needed it, and Ruthie told him to call us if he got lonely or sad. Jim asked me to get in touch with his mum, and to let her know that he was OK, and I told him it was as good as done. And then it was time for dinner prep, and we left him waving goodbye.

When I did eventually speak to Maisie she was very grateful for the call. She asked whether she could visit Jim and I said she definitely should. I told her to contact the Community to arrange it, and I offered to drive her up there, and she said that the train would be fine, and that I was such a sweet boy to offer.

I asked her how she was keeping, and she said fine, more or less, and that she was pretty much the same as usual. I suppose I knew what that meant, but I just hummed and then told her to take care, even though it was such a stupid thing to say. She told me that she would see me soon, and then she hung up the phone. I said goodbye and I did nothing else, and with my cowardice and the cowardice of everyone else it was just a short time afterwards that poor Maisie’s brutal life was brought to an end.

* * *

I got a call late one evening from one of the counsellors down at the community, telling me what had happened. My guts sank at the news, and there was guilt in me also, and I jumped in the car and drove down to see Jim, waking Mary to tell her what had happened. She wanted to come too but I asked her to stay and look after Ruthie, and she was reluctant but she agreed and kissed me a hurried goodbye.

I drove way too fast but I got there safely enough, and I found Jim sitting in the dining room, staring straight ahead and blowing on a mug of tea. I began to speak but he spoke over me without looking at me, and he said the same thing three or four times.

She’s dead.

I told him I was sorry, but he snarled at me and said that it was way too fucking late for that. I stood there for a moment trying to think of something worth saying, but everything I thought of sounded pathetic and I just gave up and sat down facing him as the silence in the room grew.

Eventually he spoke again, saying simply: drive me there. I tried to tell him that it was too late, and he laughed bitterly and told me that he was fully aware that it was way too fucking late. He said that he would walk down there through the night if I refused to drive him, and so I nodded and told him that I would drive. I asked whether he needed to check out, but the look he gave me was enough, so I grabbed his bag and followed him out of the dining room and into the cold night air.

We walked out to the car park and we got in to the car without a word to each other, with one the counsellors calling out for us to stop. We barrelled down the

driveway, and soon we were out on the highway, speeding South and East through emerald-green dairy country that was now shrouded in darkness. At one stage Jim said: faster, Nate, and I told him that the car handled like a boat, and that I was going way too fast as it was. He said nothing else for the next two hours, and I kept milling through things that I might say, finding every one of them to be hopelessly inadequate.

When we arrived in town I threaded through the streets towards Jim's old place. When we got there we found police tape across the front yard, with a police car sat out the front containing two very bored-looking officers. Jim swore and thumped the dashboard, and I sat there looking at the house until I eventually asked him what he wanted to do. I want to kill Colin, he said. Go talk to the Jacks. Find out where he is.

I got out of the car and into the brisk night, and I walked over to the patrol car. The driver wound down his window as I approached, looking over at me with a hostile expression. Good evening, I said. They were quiet enough, but they kept looking over at Jim, and it was obvious that they did not like the look of him.

Evening, I said again.
They did not greet me back.
It's late to be out, said the cop in the passenger seat.
I'm looking for Colin, I said.
Col? They both snorted. He's in the cells. He turned himself in before she was cold.
Can we visit him? I said.

The fat cop laughed at that, and told me not to be so fucking stupid. It's too late, he said. Besides, he fears reprisal from the son. I was stupid and blurted out: so he should. They both leaned forward and asked me what I had said, and I said it was nothing, and the fat one pointed at me and said: you better go before you say anything else, boy.

I wanted to say more but I had no words in me, nothing adequate anyway, and I wandered back to the car. I got in and looked over at Jim, but he just stared forward intently, his hands curled up in fists on his thighs.

So? He said.

I shook my head. He gave himself up, I said. He is down in the cells. Jim swore and told me to drive down there, but I shook my head and told him that there was no way they would let him in. He swore directly at me this time, calling me a weak cunt, and told me again to drive him down there. So I did what he wanted and drove him down to the lockup, and when we got there I killed the engine and sat there for a while and eventually I asked him: so what do you want to do?

You know what I want to do, he said. He told me that he was going to confess to something, something bad, and get put in there with Colin so that he could kill him at the first opportunity that he got. I told him to be serious, but he was silent after that, and I just sat there and tried not to look at him or say anything to upset him. After a long while I cranked the engine back to life and drove slowly out of town towards the city, and as he said nothing I just continued to drive back home. As we neared the community I told him that I would drive him back there, and he said that he did not want to go back, and also that he never should have been there in the first place. I asked him where he wanted to go, and he said: back in time. He said that he wanted to stop being a fucking deadbeat, and go back and kill that fucking cunt years and years ago when he had the chance to do it.

I drove on in silence, and as we passed the turnoff for the community I asked: are you sure? He didn't make a sound so I drove straight on. By the time we got back to our place the light was coming back into the sky, and I left the car out in the street to avoid waking the girls. I told Jim that the bed was made up in the attic room, and I gave him a new toothbrush and a fresh towel, both of which he took without a sound, and he lurched up the stairs and into his bedroom, and as I watched him go I knew he would not sleep. I crawled into bed next to Mary and I lay there thinking of poor Maisie now cold and dead on a slab somewhere, and I thought of the suffering she had endured at the hands of that man. I wondered again at my own cowardice and blindness and also the neglect of everyone who knew what she endured and could have done something to save her.

* * *

The next morning I rose to find Jim at the kitchen table, staring at the timber surface with an intensity that was new and intimidating. He softened a little whenever either of the girls spoke to him, but he was in the grip of a bitter fury that made him shake slightly, leaning forward with unblinking eyes, jiggling his knees against the table. For the next few days he did not relent from that intensity: not when he identified the body and claimed it for preparation, not when he spoke at the funeral, not even when he and I shouldered the casket, with two of his distant uncles, and took it down the aisle of the church and out towards the waiting hearse.

His speech at the funeral was heartbreaking. He spoke of the gentleness and kindness and devotion of his mother, how devout she was and how much she taught him of scripture. He described the violence she would suffer as she protected him from the rages of his own violent father, and then from the violence of another savage man. He told how he had finally fought back at fifteen, and then run away like a coward just when he might have been able to match Colin blow for blow, running instead of stepping up to protect his mother and beating that brutal man down. He told of his years of addiction that were nothing but self-obsession, and how he was thus estranged from his mother through no fault of hers. He told of the comfortable environment of rehab, and how he had been indulging in the selfish pleasures of therapy at the very same time as his mother was being beaten to death with no one to stand for her and protect her. He even described his own selfish mission when he heard of her death, meaning to avenge himself upon that man when it was clear to anyone with discernment that it was far too late to be a hero, far too late to stand up in protection of his mother. He finished by saying that he hoped his ancestors might one day forgive him, and that they might clear a path for him to redeem himself, through what suffering and loss, and enable him to become the man that he should have been for his mother.

When I looked over at Mary I saw that she was sobbing, and Ruthie was holding her tenderly and looking at me as if to say: why so much sorrow? I smiled weakly back, but if she was asking that question it was a good one, without any hope of an answer. I suppose I presumed that some universal balance would eventually prevail, and that some joy would eventually come to alleviate the sorrow, but what I have found out is that unrelenting sorrow can break people, and wear them down, and cause them to flee rather than to face more sorrow. The kind of sorrow that drives all the refugees of the world.

* * *

Mary came to me the next week and told me that she was going to defer her studies for a year in order to take a trip overseas. I was quite shocked, and things got worse when I asked her how long of a trip and she said: I don't know that yet Nate. As long as my money holds out. I composed myself and asked her

what that meant for us, and she said that she did not know, but that the best thing might be for us to break up for a while and to see what happened when she got back. I agreed that this was probably for the best but I had a horrible sinking feeling in the opposite direction, and I knew even then that I was going to lose her. She told me that her Dad had stumped up the money for the ticket and I felt a jolt of real anger at that, because he was a dirty old racist and quite unapologetic about it, and he didn't like the idea of Mary being with a blackfella like me. I knew that his largesse was motivated by a desire to separate us and I burned at that, but as always I did nothing and said nothing about it. I suppose there's no point getting between a father and a daughter, no matter what sort of an asshole that father might be.

I saw Mary to the airport less than two weeks later. She had a round-the-world ticket, and she was going to start in Bangkok and see what happened from there. This was in the era before email and cheap phone cards, and I knew that our communication would be stilted at best. Ruthie was there too, and while she was happy for Mary to travel she did not understand why we could not go with her, and she was very sulky about it. Mary tried to tell Ruth that she had to stay and look after me but Ruth went off in a huff, demanding to know when I was going to be able to look after myself.

At the airport Mary said goodbye to her family, her father smiling broadly and pretending I was not there. She kissed Ruthie goodbye and then she stood before me and I could not look at her. She told me again that she needed to do this, the same broken record, and I told her that I knew that but that I still wished that things were not that way. I asked her to stay but she smiled and kissed me and went, she went through those doors and she did not re-appear, and as I stood there blinking back tears I knew that she was gone, and that no matter what she said she would never come back to me.

* * *

Looking back now I know it was for the best, but I was pretty fucked up about it at the time. I was lucky to have Jim and Ruth to keep me company, and to distract me from my self-pity, but even though I got up in the mornings and went on with life it was a while before I got much enjoyment from it again.

There were distractions, though. I began to worry again about Ruthie being bored, and I eventually made some calls and found her some volunteer work down at the local op-shop, sorting and hanging clothes. She was a good worker, and the manager soon recommended her for a paid position at the main sorting centre down on the edge of the city. I took her down there for the first couple of days, and she really took to the work once the basics were explained. One day she would be on shoes, the next on dresses, and then on toys and so forth. I had a meeting with the supervisor and I told her what I could about Ruthie, and she smiled and said she would be very happy here. The other staff were mostly older ladies, more or less the same age as mum, and they realised very quickly that Ruthie would need a bit of extra looking after and they were all very kind to her. I asked Ruthie whether she liked the work and she said that she loved it, especially sorting the shoes and the dresses, although she was worried about the toys because a lot of them had parts missing and did not work properly. I told her that's why they needed sorting, so that poor children would have proper toys, and she nodded quietly and said that was true.

The only problem with the new arrangements was what to do about Ruthie's salary. She knew that she was earning money, and she kept at me about how much she had earned and when she would have enough to go overseas to visit Mary. I took a risk and asked her who she would like to look after her money, and she thought Uncle Mick would be a good person, because he was rich lawyer

and he might be able to make her rich too. Mick was happy to oblige, and he chuckled when I told him about her conflicting desires for wealth and travel. A common problem, he said. From that point whenever the travel issue came up Mick would ask Ruthie whether she wanted to be rich or to travel, and she always (a bit reluctantly) elected the former.

I struggled through uni and I socialised a bit, and I wrote long letters to Mary. I filled them with trivialities and a few more profound observations and even some embarrassingly overwrought words of longing. I told her that I missed her, and that I was waiting eagerly for news that she was heading home. I wrote poste restante to Bangkok, and then to Delhi, and then to Kathmandu. In return I found the odd fat envelope in my letterbox, stuffed with a letter spanning various dates, giving me details of places she had seen and people she was meeting. I read them over and over again like an idiot, until the edges got grubby from my touch and I could recite passages by heart. There were occasional mentions of other guys and I tried to interpret her spare prose and work out whether they were more than friends, but there was never anything concrete and I lived in hope that the next letter would tell me that she was coming home.

Jim stayed with us until he got an old caravan moved on to his mum's place. I was worried about how it might affect him to live down there, but he was adamant that he wanted to go. When we visited a couple of weeks later the house was missing its roof, and there were a couple of rough guys ferrying pieces of the house out to a flatbed truck owned by a demolition company. I found Jim inside the house with a wrecking bar, and I asked him whether it was legal for him to do this, with the will still in dispute. He laughed at me and told me: call the fucking cops, if you want. This house is coming down.

He came out of the dust and wreckage and we went down the street for some lunch. He told me that Colin had pleaded guilty to manslaughter, and he asked me to explain how he could be guilty of anything less than murder. I tried to explain the complexities to him but he was impatient and said that I was as bad as the cops were. As it turned out he didn't mind too much, because the sooner Colin got out the sooner Jim could, as he said, pay him a bit of a visit.

The demolition was over fairly shortly. Jim called me the Friday fortnight after my visit, and asked whether I could come down, and the next day Ruthie and I drove down to find the demolition crew decamped and the house completely gone. The old caravan now looked tiny, there on the bare block, and there was an enormous stack of split and broken hardwood piled up on what had been the house site. We sat on the ground, and Jim and I drank the cokes I had brought while Ruthie asked questions about where the house had gone.

We eventually grabbed some dinner, and then when night came down Jim doused the woodpile with a jerry can and lit it up with a frightening petrol whoosh. Flames soon lashed the black sky, and the radiant heat mounted and made us all step back and then back again, the embers soaring to such an extent that I began to worry about the houses standing downwind. Jimmy stared into the fire with bitter intensity, and I knew that he wanted that blaze to be overwhelming and violent and purifying. I half imagined that he might leap in to the flames, burning himself up as well, but he just shuddered a couple of times, and I saw some tears on his cheeks in the hot firelight. He wiped them away but they were still tears, sparse but necessary tears, and there may have been some consolation for him that night. The whole thing was quite beautiful and quite terrifying at the same time, and I was both relieved and disappointed when the fire trucks arrived and the blaze was quickly put out.

It could have gotten ugly then but the fire captain had been a mate of Dad's and he was also a very decent bloke. Like everyone in town he knew what had

happened in that house, and when the fire was gone he came up to Jim and said something like: we had to put it out, son. You know why. He also told Jim that he was sorry for his loss, and Jim shook his hand and thanked him, and then the captain told the three of us to disappear before the police arrived. We ran back to the car, and just as the first patrol car entered the street we drove quietly the other way, and we drove right back to the city and heard no more about it.

* * *

The next week I got a letter from Mary, and at Ruthie's insistence I read it aloud, after I had read it a couple of times over myself. It was a long letter, and Jim and Ruth made it much longer by interrupting with questions and asking me to re-read bits and then read them yet again.

One section of the letter concerned a place in Turkey where travellers stayed in tree houses and wandered down a valley floor to a stony blue-water beach. There were ancient fortifications on the promontories, and wooden barques moored in the deep water, and the whole valley was thick with pine trees and orange trees in blossom. Mary waxed unusually poetic as she described all of this, swearing on her life that the scent of this place was a better intoxicant than wine. She also wrote of a climb she had done with some other travellers, up to a bare ridge overlooking the valley, and with snow peaks on one side of her and the Mediterranean on the other she had experienced such a feeling of peace and exhilaration that she never wanted to come back down.

I must have had three requests from Jim to read this bit again. Eventually I just handed him the letter and told him to tell me when he was ready to continue. I waited and then made tea and still there was no sign of him stopping. Finally he looked up and he said something emphatic like: I am so fucking there. Ruthie immediately shot up her hand, and said she was also fucking there. I tried to pour some oil on the waters, pointing out that Mary was not even there anymore, and that she was probably in love with some completely new place at that very moment. Jim was not swayed, though. I'm not going for her, he said. Me neither, said Ruthie. I told them both that we should just finish the letter, grabbing it back from Jim.

The letter went on for a few more pages, telling of a few days' journey on a sailing boat, some time in Istanbul, and then missing a flight to Frankfurt. She messed up the dates, she said. But they were kind to her and let her on the next flight, and apart from a night in an expensive German hostel there was no harm done. I came to the end of the letter, and then I reminded my little audience that this news was now over two weeks old, and that Mary would now be in London, or God knows wherever else that she decided she wanted to be.

I thought Jim would forget the letter pretty quickly, but after the demolition and the fire he had nothing to stay for, and he meant what he said about going. The very next morning he headed into town, and when I got home that afternoon he showed me a return ticket to London, with a side trip to Istanbul. I asked him whether he needed to get a visa, and he said no, so long as he had a passport. He had this idea that you could get one from the chemist, but I told him that was only for the photos, and that getting a passport might take quite some time. We called Immigration and found out that they were prepared to expedite a passport application for a hefty fee, and he either had to pay it or forfeit his plane ticket. Fucking greedy bastards, he called them, but although there were just a couple of days in it he did manage to get his passport in time.

Ruthie threw a fit when she heard that Jim was going overseas without her. She stewed for a couple of days, and I only won her over by buying her a book called The World Travellers Companion, which had lovely colour photos, and I told her

that I would take her anywhere she wanted to go over my next summer holidays. From that point on every time we got a letter from Mary or from Jim I would have to read it in tiny pieces, interrupted by the need to consult in detail with the World Travellers Companion, and look at the relevant photos.

In a few days time we drove Jim out to the airport. Ruthie walked up to the check-in desk with him and handed over his documents, because she wanted to get as much experience as she could for when she was travelling herself. I told Jim to call us collect if he got into trouble, and Ruthie told him that she wanted letters from everywhere he went. Jim was obviously nervous and he looked a lot younger than he was, partly because his huge new backpack made him look more slight than usual. But he was resolute, and we hugged him in turn, and I got him to show me his ticket and his boarding pass and passport and travellers cheques, and then he walked straight out through the immigration gate without looking back.

* * *

Afterwards life became a bit lean, with just Ruth and me left. Thankfully I was kept busy at my new job in the library of a law firm, updating loose-leaf services and accessioning new books and journals. It was brain-dead work in some ways, but I liked chatting with the lawyers and the support staff and there was no brain-burn to divert me from my studies. I began to tire of the commute back to the suburbs, and to be honest the house began to give me the creeps a bit, thinking of the things it had witnessed. I thought about it and looked in the paper, and one night I asked Ruthie what she thought of the idea of moving. She looked surprised for a second, and then she said quite reasonably that it would depend on the house we would move into.

We drove around the inner city the next weekend, and she agreed with me that North Carlton and North Fitzroy had a nice feel. I rang Mick and he told me that buying there would be a reasonable investment, and he told me the worst house best street rule, and he also suggested that I sub-divide our present block before selling it in order to maximise the yield. He set that process in motion, and I looked for places with Ruthie. Her main requirement was that there be room in the house for Jim and Mary, even if Mary wasn't in love with me any more and wanted her own room. Eventually we settled on a tatty but spacious double-fronted Victorian place, with a passable 70's renovation in the back and also a bungalow out across a paved and leafy courtyard. I asked Ruthie whether she wanted to live in the bungalow, if we cleaned it up, and we spent a fair whack of cash to smarten it up. Ruthie was worried when the tradies were pulling it apart but once it was finished she thought it was lovely, with its polished wood floor and French doors, and she told everyone she met about it. She moved in as soon as we got it furnished, and she would cook dinner in there for us both every Friday night, and we would watch bad TV and agree that it was easily the nicest space in the house.

Some nights I would read her the latest letter from either Jim or Mary, even if none had come that week. Jim did eventually go to Turkey, and he confirmed what Mary had said about the pine and orange blossom and the blue-water beaches. He liked the scenery but he had found the travellers snooty and unpleasant, and so he decided to go to places that were much more out of the way. He rode trains and buses moving east, and he described seeing Mount Ararat rising from the dusty plains under its eternal snow, and he said that he aimed to climb it and perhaps to find Noah's ark. Ruthie asked whether that was the same Noah's ark as the one with the animals, and when I said yes she went quiet, and then said: I think that's where I want to go.

The letter finished with Jim saying that he had made some friends with a bunch of Kurds he had met in a border town near Ararat. He said these boys were different from the Turks, and that he could relate to them far better than anyone he had ever met. He also said he was safe, and he told me not to worry if I didn't hear from him for a while. Words which had exactly the opposite effect.

Ruthie listened right to the end of the letter, and then she said quietly: I'm glad Jimmy made some friends. I was worried about the sort of friends they were but I smiled and said that Jim would always have us as friends, no matter where he went in the world. Ruthie nodded gravely, and asked whether Jim would come home one day. I said it was more than likely, and she looked puzzled for a moment and then asked: how much is more than likely? Sometimes she asks the most insanely complicated questions.

* * *

We heard no more of Jim for a long time after that. I worried about him, some days more than others, but I was pretty busy at university and I didn't spare him too many thoughts.
Ruthie was fine at work but her money was mounting up, and she began to really hassle me about our promised trip overseas. I tried to divert her but she was becoming very insistent, and I knew that it was her right to go, and also my responsibility to go with her and give her the experience she craved.

In October I got a letter from Mary telling me that she was going to be in Prague for two weeks in December, and I read that letter to Ruthie with extra enthusiasm because I had already decided that we were going to meet her there. I bought Ruth a Prague guidebook with a good collection of pictures, and she decided that this spectacular city was definitely where she wanted to go. I wrote to Mary and told her that we were coming, and she called as soon as she got the letter, just a quick call, and she said something like: Nate you and Ruthie have just totally made my day.

In early December Ruthie and I flew into Frankfurt, after a crazy few days in Hong Kong. We had planned to take the train from there to Prague, and although we barely made the connection we were soon speeding over white fields, with Ruthie continually pestering me to go back to the dining car. Mary had flown directly into Prague the morning we touched down, and she was waiting for us to arrive by train much later that night. Everything went smoothly until we got to the Czech border and got thrown off the train, owing to our lack of visas. We had to backtrack to Munich to visit the embassy there, and we were delayed an extra day because on our first trip out there we arrived just after noon to find the embassy already closed to the public.

I worried that Ruthie would be upset by all of this mucking around, and I felt like an idiot for exposing her to it, but she remembered from her travel books that travelling comes with setbacks, and that there are always things to enjoy if you get knocked off your path for a while. She liked walking the frozen streets of Munich with me, and we ate wurst from street vendors and went to the old art gallery and the new art gallery and Ruthie was left very puzzled by the new art, although she did her best to enjoy it. Ruthie made friends with the owner of the hotel where we were staying, and his well-fed wife thought she was a darling, and she brought us hot chocolate and dark bread and butter and recommended places we should eat.

Eventually we got back on the train, and traversed those white fields until we arrived in the centre of Prague. Mary was there to meet us, two days late as we were, and she scolded me gently for the visa debacle. She took us to the

apartment she had found for us, at ten dollars a night, and although it was a bit faded it was still quite lovely in its own way.
Prague was dead frozen at that time of the year but in the clear cold light it was also extremely beautiful. We visited the bridge and the churches and the palace on the hill, and we ducked into cafes every hour or so to defrost enough so that we could keep on walking around. Mary had a new camera that she had loaded with black and white film, and she had Ruthie pose for her in various atmospheric locations and boy did Ruthie love being her model. We ate in bars and cheap restaurants and drank tall bottles of Czech beer, and the local men all wanted to talk to Ruthie and ask her where she was from. Australia, she would say. And she was so charming. Have you heard of it?

As for Mary and me? There was just more of the same. We had our own room, and we slept in a big soft bed, and in the nighttime and the early mornings I would ask her: so are we back together? Or can we be? And she would laugh quietly and shake her head and say things like: you don't even know what you are asking. And I would protest that I did know very well and she would hush me with her hands and then with kisses. I asked her a couple of times whether there was anyone else and again she hushed me and told me that such things were not important, and that I should be happy with the present moment and not spoil it with envy, and just welcome what there was between us without worrying at it all the time.

It was an amazing trip, but looking back now my main memory is of that daily question: are we together again? And her gentle evasiveness, telling me to please not ask her that question again. And of course the three of us arm-in-arm across the breadth of that city, in the coal-smog and cold air, sometimes even with snow falling, and all of us trying to catch the grey flakes on our tongues.

Mary flew out after a week and a half, leaving me and Ruth there for a few more days. When I kissed her goodbye I asked when she was coming home and she said: Don't be obtuse, Nate. It's not my home any more.

And then she was gone.

Ruthie knew I would be sad, and when the taxi disappeared left she grabbed my arm and told me that everything was all right, because at least we had each other and nothing would ever change that. I told her that I was very happy to hear that, and felt very lucky to have her, and I agreed that we were quite enough for one other, no matter who else might come and go. I didn't really believe that at the time, I suppose, but looking back now it was probably a very true thing. With the wisdom of hindsight I also know that there were far better things awaiting me in my future than the sincere but half-assed love that Mary was capable of giving me.

* * *

We flew back into Melbourne, and I went back to work and then eventually back to university. Ruthie also went back to work, though with some travel under her belt she was a different woman than her workmates had farewelled. She had taken to wearing silk scarves as she had seen women in Europe do, and we had bought a whole bunch of Hermes rip-offs in Prague. She had also bought some French perfume at the airport duty free, and a pair of oversized sunglasses that added to her glamorous look.

I had a reasonable time, sometimes with my friends from uni, but mostly I stayed home and studied and wrote more letters to Mary. I had a stupid fling with this girl whom I met at film society, and though she was quite pretty and a very decent person I just couldn't get that enthused about her, and I ended up

messing her around a bit. Eventually I pulled away and she gave me a decent serve, and although it was probably warranted it was enough to dissuade me from going after anyone else, and I went kind of monk and was lonely and I did not enjoy anything very much.

Looking back at that time I suppose I might have been a bit depressed, looking at things from that point of view. I lost interest in socialising, and when I did go out I felt like I was wrapped up in cotton wool, with my words hard to find and the background noise overwhelming. I found my friends increasingly tiresome but quite honestly they were, with their extravagant and unfounded notions about love and literature and society, and there had lately erupted a sort of sport-love culture, too. You dated people only so you would have stories to tell your friends: how this one or that one had man-hands, or little ears, or had tried to lick your eyeball. It was tiresome and disrespectful and they probably tired of me too, with my sentimentality, my maudlin yearning for a woman who did not yearn for me. They also ragged on me more and more for the amount of work that I did at university, which I always thought was unfair, and although I held occasional dinners at our place it was a barometer of the times that they were much more often for Ruthie's friends from work than for my own friends. They faded out eventually, the way that flawed friendships do, and I don't regret that at all now, letting those friends slip away.

* * *

One Sunday afternoon I got a surprise telephone call from Jim. He was in Deepdene, at our old house, and as I struggled to find my words he told me that he had gone directly there from the airport. He had knocked on the door, and only remembered his mistake when a stranger opened the door. The new owners were kind enough to let him use their phone, and they also made him a cup of tea. He asked where the backyard had gone, and I laughed and told him that I would be over to pick him up, and that I could explain things when I saw him. When I got there he was sitting on the front veranda, now drinking a beer with his host, no doubt regaling him with some hair-raising stories from his recent escapades.

As Jim got into the car I shook the man's hand, and thanked him for helping us out. He told me it was a pleasure, and he also said: some interesting tales there. I told him that he did not know the half of it, and he nodded at me and said that he could well imagine. I thanked him again, and he said: no problem. I should have told him: it's decent people like you that hold the world together. But I just shook his hand, and headed back towards the car.

As I drove Jim to our new place I told him why we had shifted, and about the subdivision, and he looked sheepish and said that he couldn't believe that it had slipped his mind. He told me he must have been on autopilot or something. He looked quite gaunt, even more slight than I remember, and there was a hardness about his look that was also new and unsettling. I told him there was a room for him at our place for as long as he wanted, and that Ruth had been very clear on that fact. He said that he was grateful, but that he wouldn't be troubling us for very long.

Ruthie greeted him with some European-style kisses on each cheek, and Jim softened and seemed to take some comfort in that. She insisted that we have dinner in her bungalow that night, and she cooked lamb chops that Jim fairly ripped into, and he told us that he had been on lean rations for quite a while and he thanked Ruthie for the feast. He was very complimentary about her new living space, and she told him about the room in the front of the house that was reserved for him. He said he was looking forward to getting his own place soon,

and she said that she understood that but there would always be room here should he need it.

Later that night Jim and I sat out on the front steps and drank some beer while Ruthie watched her dance program. I asked Jim about his time in Turkey, and he swore me to secrecy and I swore on my dad's grave, and then he gathered himself for the telling. And although I may have reconstructed some of this from his subsequent book, what follows is near enough what he told me of his adventures:

* * *

Jim had spent a long time making his way towards Heathrow, where he changed directly for Istanbul, waiting for the best part of a day in the airport until his flight came around. He could have gone into town and perhaps even seen Mary, but he said had no real interest in tackling that city and so he flew directly on to Turkey.

By the time Jim landed in Istanbul he was pretty fucked for lack of sleep, and he let some tout take him to a grotty hostel where they charged him too much for a room, and then wanted more money for sheets and towels. He slept and then found a better place run by a friendly family, and he slept some more and then walked up and down both sides of the Bosphorus. He saw catacombs and mosques and ate meat and bread, and no one could work out where he came from. He would say Australia and they would shake their heads and say that he didn't look Aussie to them. He took that as a measure of our own racism, in terms of what we showed the world, rather than their racism, and he tried to set them straight but all they really wanted to talk about was Gallipoli and how that was an invasion, and he told them that it was not the first invasion engineered by the British and they nodded and said that was very true.

Istanbul was not his main destination, so after changing a pile of money he took a bus down towards the southern coast, stopping off in the main town there for more kebabs and more disbelief about where he came from. He rode a local bus over terrible roads and ended up at Olympos, where he was a little disappointed to find that the tree houses were more like stilt houses set up amongst the trees. The valley was very pretty, though, with the scent of pine resin and orange blossom. Jim thought the other tourists eyed him strangely, as if he didn't belong to their ways, and should perhaps have been serving them instead of dining with them. Whatever the truth of that Jim eventually got into a scuffle with a young Finnish guy who told him that Aboriginal people were not properly evolved, and after Jim had knocked him out he had to fend off his girlfriend, who was hysterically trying to smash Jim's head in with a rock. He packed his things and left on the next bus before the police could arrive, if that was indeed what was going to happen. He didn't want to take the risk, and thinking that they might even be there to grab him at the airport, he decided to go the opposite way until things calmed down again.

Jim headed east, towards territory that tourists rarely enter. He ended up in a dangerous border town near Ararat, where he was lonely and quite frightened until a bunch of Kurdish students befriended him. These guys were actually interested in where he came from, and in the different groups in Australian society, and when he gave them a summary of the last 200 years they nodded intently and said yes, you are very like us Kurds. Then they asked: do you fight? And Jim told them no, our people do not fight, but we do demonstrate and also go to court for land rights. And they looked gravely upon that news and said something like: the world is not that way. For us, for you. Nothing can be won unless you are prepared to spill blood, your blood and the blood of others.

Jim said that he felt ashamed because he knew nothing about Kurds, and thus was little better than the other racists he had been meeting. They didn’t judge him, though. They knew why he was ignorant. You do not hear of us, they said, because we are oppressed. Like your people, whom we do not know. They silence history so that it does not speak of us. They told him something about Kurdish history, and their existence here and in neighbouring countries, and they were candid about their bloody struggle for a separate homeland and the right to self-determination. They call us Mountain Turks, they said. But this is a lie. We are free Kurds, and we have always been.

Jim soon got over his shame and began to feel very much at home, and eventually he was taken to meet one of the senior PKK operatives, who seemed too young for that position. He spoke in more detail about the war in the mountains, and about Kurdish destiny to own these lands that had been taken by the enemy. The land was harsh and marginal but it was their own land, and they were prepared to die to win it back again.

Although they didn't beg for it Jim decided to give them a fair chunk of the money he had with him. It was just money, he said, and he would otherwise have pissed it up against a wall, travelling around being a useless wanker contributing nothing to anyone. In return they gave him some stern advice, and it was something like: Fight for your people. Win back your land. And do not spare the invaders any suffering. What they suffer, they have brought upon themselves. Mercy is a conceit of their own design, they demand it but they will never be merciful to you.

Jim was inspired and also a little homesick, so he thought he might head back home. Before he left his new friends asked him whether he might run some errands for them. He ended up ferrying big rolls of cash down into Syria, and coming back with sheets of co-ordinates for weapons drops up on the slopes of the mountain. Jim knew that an Aussie-looking Aussie would have been better, but his passport got him across both ways without incident and he ended up unharmed. He later realised that he might just have been a decoy for the real courier, running his errands to throw the enemy off the scent, with wads of worthless paper on the way out and the way back in.

When Jim finished those missions he begged to be taken into the hills to meet some of the fighters, but the Turks were massing for a push after the thaw and it was deemed to be too dangerous. Instead he was taken to a safe house to meet four PKK fighters who had just come down from the mountain. They were in very poor condition, a few degrees past gaunt, and they had a strangely flat emotional tone that spoke of exhaustion or trauma or a good slice of both.

The fighters said they had been on the mountain for almost a year. The previous spring the Turkish army had advanced on their positions, but they only attacked fake campsites that had deliberately been left there as decoys. While the boy soldiers milled around smoking and waiting for order the Kurds had detonated claymores and other explosives, and then shot the Turks down using high velocity hunting rifles from the ridges around each site. The Turks had returned fire and also called them cowards, their voices ringing out in the valley as they dared them to show themselves and to fight like men. But this is to fight, his friends said. If you are few, if you face an invading army.

Eventually Turkish patrols would head for higher ground and the guerrillas would retreat, leaving the invaders to lose their way and develop frostbite and suffer and even die up there, with no one to shoot or fight.

The Turks suffered but so did the Kurds, with their irregular supply lines and hopelessly inadequate gear. Light planes out of Syria would make occasional supply drops but they were always unreliable, and in the squally winds and harsh terrain the drops would often be inaccessible. The fighters got by on wild goats and berries, but these were lean rations and they would lose condition very quickly. They were hardy and they did not complain, but within a year their health was pretty much ruined, and they would come back to the lowlands to fatten up again for another stint up on the mountain.

Now Jim told all of this in a later book, and it is all there for the reading, but this one last thing might serve as some sort of summary of the rest, and even perhaps a foretaste of what Jim was later to achieve. One of the PKK fighters told him about Ararat, saying that the Turks call the mountain Agri Dagi: the mountain of pain. That is their experience, he said, and we bring it upon them with such weapons as we have. The pain is there for us also, but only until we disperse these invaders from our land.

And this is our mountain, he said. Her true name is Fire Mountain. This occupation comes to us as a test, and it purifies us like fire, and in time we will sweep the invaders away like ashes. We rain down fire. We will destroy our enemy. We will prevail, through such tests as may come. We will never surrender.

* * *

After Jim had told me the story we were quiet for a while. I asked him how he got out of Turkey, and he said his friends had eventually pressed him to leave because he was now being watched, and so was presumably of no further use as a courier or decoy. He delayed his departure for a long time, thinking he might escape north or further east but he eventually mustered up the courage to head back to Istanbul. He was questioned fiercely at Istanbul airport, and he endured a few nervous hours before they put him on a flight to London and warned him never to come back to Turkey. Whether it was the Kurds or the Finn or overstaying his visa he was never quite sure, but he heaved a big sigh once his plane left the tarmac. He had a few days to wait in London and so he called Mary, and she told him he could sleep on her lounge room floor, rather than in the filthy hostel he had found. He lay pretty low, and did not go out pilling with Mary, and so he saw virtually nothing of London before he got on his plane for home. When he got to Tullamarine they searched him and questioned him about his movements in Turkey, and then let him go without any apology or explanation. Then he found his way to our place, which wasn't our place anymore, and so on up until now.

I told him I was grateful that he was still alive, and he said: you and me both, Nate. He asked about Mary, and I told him that there was no change. He nodded and quietly said something like: you know about that other bozo? I told him that I didn't, and he was silent for a little while, and he thought about it and then said: that's fucked. And there was nothing I could really add to that summary of the situation.

We went back inside to sit for a while with Ruthie, and then Jim went off to brush his teeth and then fall into bed. After he had gone Ruth told me he looked sad and skinny, and I told her that he was exactly that, and that it was up to us to make him happy and feed him up again. She said she would look in her recipe books for a fattening recipe, and I told her sausages were fattening and that I would buy some tomorrow. When she went off the bed she hugged me extra tight and told me that she would never let me get skinny like that. I told her I was actually getting too fat, and I stuck my gut out and she laughed and said: you are not allowed to have any sausages. And then I went to bed, pulling Jim's door

closed as I passed, and I lay awake for a long time thinking of him and his near-death experiences, and how much trouble he seemed able to pull into his life, and I supposed that he would continue to do so even though I had no idea of the extent to which that would turn out to be true.

* * *

Jim was gone when I got up the next morning. Ruthie told me that he had gone down to the library, and when I asked her which one she said: the big one at the museum. She had made him a jam sandwich to take with him in case he got hungry. I had nothing much to do, so I walked down to the city to see whether I could find him.

He was in the main reading room, underneath the big dome. He looked up as I approached, some instinct alerting him to the fact that he was about to be interrupted. I said hello in my best library whisper and in return he held up a book and asked why they used such obscure language. I told him that concepts themselves can be pretty difficult, and he said something like: not that fucking difficult. He asked me whether I knew about the massacres, and I told him that I did, and he asked me whether I knew how many there were and I told him that I didn't, and also that nobody really knew. He snorted and said that plenty of people knew, but that nobody wanted to admit that they had happened. They don't even make it into history, he said.

He showed me an excerpt from an old letter written by a squatter aggrieved by the savages (as he called them) who were killing his cattle. Later a few such letters made it into his books, and I think it might be the one that includes the following passage:

…I most humbly beg further to state, that although no person can entertain more charitable feelings for our unenlightened brethren, or be more inimical to coercion than myself, I nevertheless beg to suggest the necessity…of their being made to see our superiority of power…

Superiority of Power. Jim read it again and said something like: you know what that means. It means: massacre. Massacre and enslavement and dispossession. He showed me some more fragments he had found, and I was quite unsettled by them, and so I enticed him out into the sun. I bought him a coffee at the kiosk, and we walked back and sat on the library steps and the sun was very soothing. He offered me part of Ruthie's jam sandwich, and as we ate we talked some more, or rather he talked.

He wanted to find out the truth, he told me. He wanted to find out how much violence had been used against aboriginal people. I said that there was nothing to be done about it now, and he swore at me and told me that there was plenty that could be done. I guess I mouthed some platitudes about cultural myopia and the gaps left in history, and he said that he intended to find those deliberate gaps and fill them in with the truth. I told him that nobody would listen to him, and he said that he could make them listen, the way the Turks now listen very carefully to the claims and the rifles of the PKK.

He told me that he was going to read history, and read every single fragment he could find about genocide. He said he was going to read until he could work out what really happened, and who was to blame, and then he swore he would sheet home the blame to the people who were responsible. I told him that he should perhaps write something, and he told me that he was not talking about words. He said that he was after actual retribution, actual payback, actual revenge.

He squashed the remains of his sandwich down into his now empty paper cup. I asked whether he was going back in, and he said that he was, and with that he got up and walked straight back into the library. Back into the History Wars, as they came to be called, but he was not interested in some white academic struggle to prove an intellectual point. He went back to find more motivation for war, and for everything that would follow from that desire, because there was so much fight in Jim that he would never be satisfied with words.

* * *

Jim's thirst was for war, and he might have moved more swiftly towards that had it not been for the intervention of the one thing that can retrieve a man out of his anger and alienation, that thing with the power to make race traitors of us all.

Her name was Elle. Jim brought her home from the library late one evening, and I could tell just by looking at him that he was gone for all money. She had some extravagant made-up name for herself, like Starlight or Moonbeam, but I was a bit stroppy and just called her Elle, much to her annoyance.

She and Jim had gotten to chatting when the library had been evacuated for a fire drill, and she told him that she was there researching a paper for her voice studies up at the conservatorium. He told her why he was there and she had found that quite thrilling, as she said when she met us, going on to say that finding such a passionate man was a rare pleasure indeed. Instead of going back to their books they had headed down to the Museum Hotel for a quick beer that had ended up as five or six. As they got more and more tipsy she started touching him under the table, and they ended up in a clinch, confessing all manner of feelings for one other.

I will be honest and say that I never really liked Elle, not even when I first met her later on that same night. She struck me as smug and opportunistic, and she also completely ignored Ruthie. She looked around our place with her foxy eyes and she looked at me the same way, glancing down at my clothes and assessing them and working out what we might be worth. We sat around the table with Jim talking a mile a minute, and she nuzzled into him and she laughed for effect and she smiled her odious smile. Eventually they went to bed and she began moaning and hollering, and Ruthie asked me what was happening and I tried to give her some explanation. They kept on and on as I tried to sleep in the next room, and although I couldn't say anything I grew quite angry at their lack of consideration for anyone other than themselves.

We started to see a lot of Elle. She was very impressed with what she called Jim's stamina, and she would loudly compliment him on it around the breakfast table. She also went on and on about his potential, and what he might become, and he was just too smitten to be offended by that suggestion of present inadequacy. I suppose I might have been a bit jealous, if I'm honest, because when she told him that he should study he believed it, whereas he had never once believed me when I had told him, over and over, the very same thing.

In the early days of the relationship Jim thrived under the pressure she put on him. He enrolled in a special bridging course designed to get aboriginal kids into university, and he managed over the next year to get enough done to let him enrol in arts with a history major. He did well at that too, with his outrage and his eloquence. Although Elle may have been the catalyst for his success he owed it mostly to his own intellect and application. Sadly even though Jim slaved and shone and succeeded, Elle's aspirations were unlimited, and any time he achieved something great she wanted more and better from him, and it grew more money-focussed the longer it went on.

I tried, I honestly did, but I never liked Elle and it got worse the more I knew her. I take some comfort from the fact that Ruthie did not warm to her either, although she raised no explicit word of complaint. We tried hard, and we would go down to see Elle sing in the foyer of the arts centre, and although I applauded I could not shake the feeling that she was terribly in love with herself. The way she swayed and moved her hands, and that put-on throaty voice. I found it increasingly repellent, as strong as that sounds, but Jim loved her without question and did his best to please her and meet her demands and give her what she wanted. It eventually went sour, as it was bound to do, but in the early stages he was in for all money and there was nothing we could have done to save him from the disaster that was looming.

* * *

Over the next few years things kept on fairly smoothly, without too much seeming to happen, although when I look at it there really were seismic shifts in the courses of all of our lives.

There was Jim, for example. He finished his history degree and graduated, and then went on through a fast-track masters to a new position as lecturer in indigenous history at the University. I think it was originally intended more as an ancient history post, but Jim focussed mostly on settlement/invasion, and his courses were so popular that the Dean was happy enough to leave things as Jim made them.

I also made it to graduation, though it was with far less flair than Jim. I did my articles at Legal Aid, and I stayed on there for a further year or so, until the bureaucracy of the place began to get to me and I decided to get out and do something a bit more off my own bat. I took some time off with the vague thought I might write a bit but I could find no worthwhile subject matter, and the bits and pieces that I did write were pretty much rubbish. I wasted some time, and thought more about escaping back to the country, but I ended up joining a little criminal firm down at the bottom end of the city.

Immediately after hiring me the principal of the place decided that he would retire, and he sold the practice to me for practically nothing, on the proviso that I would perform at least 10 percent of my work pro bono. He also told me to look after indigenous people where I could. He died shortly afterwards of some very aggressive cancer, and at his funeral his widow told me that he had held me in very high esteem. I thanked her and offered my condolences, and I thought how strange it was that people always seem to decide on such scant information about your worth as a person.

So I found myself in charge of my own firm before I really knew much about the practice of criminal law. The work was pretty basic though, and although I missed things here and there my pleas were usually fairly well done, and I seemed to be able to convince most magistrates to be reasonable, at least, and sometimes they were very lenient.

In those early days I would buy my clients lunch or coffee after our morning in court, and I would try to tell them that there were plenty of options for them outside a life of violence and addiction and prison. I tried not to be preachy and most of them thanked me sincerely for shouting them lunch, but they would usually disengage when I tried to talk to them about changing their lives, and look past me and say yeah yeah yeah. When they shook my hand and left I knew that they would head straight back into their one-way lives, without a thought for what I had said. I learned a bit about the ineffectiveness of words, even those words motivated by good intentions, and how nothing can change a mind unless that mind is genuinely seeking to be changed. In court I would often prevent

these kids from going to prison, and from all of the horror that was in there, but that was really all that I could do, and the respite I earned them was for the most part temporary. After a while I would just buy lunch and say: It's up to you, where you end up. I may not be able to keep you out, next time you fuck up. And there were some kids that I never saw again, which in my line of work is considered to be a pretty good sign.

* * *

Jim married Elle, after a relatively short engagement, and while we all worried he was over the moon about it. He actually asked me what I thought, after he had popped the question, and I mumbled something about not really knowing her and he laughed at me and said something like: you don't like her, Nate, I know that. But that's OK, because you're not the one who is marrying her. I asked him why he had even bothered to ask me, and he smiled and said: I kinda like to see you squirm.

The wedding was on the small side, with the guests barefoot on the beach down at Merricks, and dinner at a winery back up into the hills. Ruthie got drunk with some idiot who kept pouring her champagne, and I was ready to punch him until he apologised to me sincerely, saying that he didn't realise about her special needs as he called them. I was still very unimpressed but his apology seemed heart-felt, and I decided that his main problem was ignorance rather than any sort of malice. And all that really happened was that Ruthie danced a bit enthusiastically. With Elle's flamboyant music friends she probably fitted in better than I did.

Poor Jim was absolutely besotted, and it erased any trace of sense from his mind. Elle found a house for them just down the road from our place, and they paid a fortune for it, and they embarked on a major renovation that they were unable to afford. I saw the plans and I asked Jim how much it was going to cost, and he said: a shitload, but this is what she wants. I told him that he should be wary of too much debt, and he said that it was all under control, and so they ploughed on into that dangerous territory and they spent money and Elle's aspirations grew unabated.

My life went by. I kept on at my little firm, getting better at pleas and deciding more and more to brief counsel for trial work. I ended up taking on a partner, so that I could have some leave from time to time, and that turned out to be one of the best things that has ever happened to me, and to everyone in my life.

I had a few applicants but I knew that Bernard was the right one the instant I met him. He was a perfectly urbane and well-mannered chap, to the point where some people find him a bit aloof when they first come to meet him. But he is anything but that, as soon as you get to know him. He is tremendously generous, and he has a scrupulously fair nature, and he never ever writes anyone off no matter what they might have done. We do not know their circumstances, he will say. They may have suffered things that we cannot even conceive.

I was not surprised that he and Jim liked each other from the instant they met. They have very similar minds, although Berns is more broadly read, and he was never really prey to Jim's bitterness. Jim started telling me that Bernard was blacker than I was, despite the fact that he is pale enough to burn even under a fluorescent light. They would wind each other up into more and more extravagant claims about the corrupt nature of civilisation, and its inherently genocidal nature, even though Bernard is by far the most civilised person I have ever met.

Jim wasn't the only one who liked Bernard. When I brought him home Ruthie instantly fell in love, and she grabbed his arm and patted him and took him off to see her little house. When he left that night she kissed him right on the mouth, and she told me in a very matter-of-fact way that she was going to be his girlfriend. I tried to moderate her expectations but she had made up her mind, and I didn't try to press the point. In the end she seems to have been proven right, although things between them may not be quite what a conventional view of romance would demand.

Bernard began visiting us regularly, and he would never arrive without a bottle of wine under his arm, and usually a DVD to watch after dinner. On those nights Ruth would be very eager to cook, and we would each have a glass of the wine so that we could have a look at it, as she quickly learned to say. I would try to have a look, although I never really knew what I was seeing, and Ruth became much more expert than me in a very short space of time.

After dinner we would retire to Ruth's place to watch the movie that Bernard had brought. They were mostly old films, often in black and white, with mannered performances and fraught love affairs and everything sexual reduced to hinting and subtext. I began to skip the film part of the evening but Ruthie fell in love with these films and the romantic world they portrayed, and she even took to dressing like their heroines, in little jackets and bold lipstick, and for a while she even pestered me to allow her to smoke cigarettes, although she knew they were terribly bad for her.

It was amazing, and it was strange, and I worried and I gave thanks and then I worried again. In an effort to get some perspective I spoke to Mick about it, and after I had tried to explain my concerns he said slowly: so they watch sweet old movies and sip fine wine. Sounds horrible, Nate. I told him that Ruthie might be getting attached to Bernard, and Mick laughed some more and said that anyone would get attached to a person who treated them so well.

Bernard treated Ruthie well and he also treated her like an adult, and I am ashamed to admit that he might have been the first person in her life to really do that. Among his myriad acquaintances was a woman named Claudette who ran a boutique in the city, specialising in pre-loved designer wear. He had a word to her and got Ruth a weekend trial that ended in a job offer before lunch on the first day. She started off just pressing and hanging clothes, but she was extremely charming with the customers and she ended up working out on the sales floor. She would fix these mostly older women with a very serious look, and she would say with great sincerity and gravity: I love it, I absolutely love it. Or if she didn't love it she would just say, as Bernard had suggested: I'm not quite sure about that. Perhaps we could give this one a try. She lacked the usual guile of sales people, and with her grace and sincerity she was an absolute smash hit with her customers. She began to arrive home with cards that they had sent her, telling her how wonderful she had been and promising to return soon and also to send their friends to see her. Claudette soon put her on a commission and she made an absolute packet, and when I asked her what she would do with her money she said that she was going to do what actresses do, and set up a charitable foundation to help the poor.

She and Bernard spent a lot of time together. They went to the races, and to fancy cocktail bars, and they sipped a little champagne and charmed the absolute pants off everyone they met. Ruthie always carried that same graceful and intense sincerity, and she would meet new friends and old friends and say things like: I absolutely love your hair. You look so radiant today. And people just could not get enough of it. The two of them drifted through bars and parties and they were terribly elegant and chatty and the few times I went out with them I felt positively awkward in comparison.

I saw her change so much, and I also saw very clearly that she had become so much more than Dad and I had ever allowed her to be. He had loved her unconditionally, and was motivated by the very best intentions, but I saw how much he had held her back and how I was also heir to that same mistake. I tried to apologise for it one day, and I was awkward and made a hash of it but Ruth just grabbed my hand and told me that I was her little brother, and that she expected me to make mistakes sometimes. And so she moved onwards and upwards without a hint of bitterness or resentment, and I knew that despite his fears Dad would have loved to see her flourish. I wondered sometimes whether he had actually convinced God to send Bernard to us, in order to undo the only mistake that he ever really made in the way that he had brought us up.

* * *

Ruth loved Bernard and he loved her right back, and soon they were not the only ones caught up in that emotion. One Friday night Berns and I went out for a drink and we ran into his friend Jane, who had just finished her articles and was intending to go to the bar when she could get some money together. I liked her look very much, and that made me awkward, but as we spoke she touched me gently a few times and my heart began to race at the possibilities that portended. I invited the two of them back to my place, and although we only drank a little I began to feel quite tipsy, and Jane and I became more and more intertwined on one couch while Bernard and Ruthie giggled at us from the other. Ruth asked Bernard to stay, and she put him to bed in the guest room with a big kiss on the forehead. She then went to bed, telling us pointedly that she would see us both in the morning.

I was quite brash, and I asked Jane to stay. She said: only if you promise not to make a move on me. I made that promise and we slept together that night in my big bed without any shenanigans at all, although I did stroke her hair softly as we lay there falling asleep. The next morning we all went out for breakfast, and as the coffee and eggs revived us Ruthie asked Jane if she loved me yet, and Jane laughed and said that she was not quite sure but that she would find out pretty soon. Ruth nodded gravely and told Jane that I needed a girlfriend, and she also told her that she would be good match for me, and Jane laughed some more and said that even at this stage she could see that both of these things were very true.

Ah, she was sweet, and she was tough, and she was smart and generous and as sexy as hell, and I fell terribly hard for her. Ruthie loved her immediately, and would always hug her intensely whenever she would come over, and Jane took all of that in her stride and hugged Ruthie right back. Jane was more social than me, and she took me along to parties, and while she seemed to talk to every man in the room she always sought me out if I went missing a bit. And though every man loved her and desired her she always went home with me. I started to brief her, even though I probably shouldn’t have, and she did a marvellous job of defending my clients, bringing to bear a subtle and persuasive intimacy with magistrates and judges that they found wonderfully appealing, and she would run sly circles around the stodgy police prosecutors, who liked her even as she stripped their cases back to a mess of allegation and conjecture.

And the best bit was that Jane seemed to love me, just for the person that I was. I felt that acceptance from the very first night we met, and from that point she never gave me a reason to doubt her affection for me. I could relax into our relationship, and I began to see what people were talking about when they spoke of rightness, and finding the right one. She never paid out on me, or complained about me, and all of that gave me space to feel quite sure and quite absolute about her. I spoke about it with Bernard, and he told me that they broke the

mould when they made her, and I looked around and I could see plainly that there was nobody else the least bit like Jane O'Dea, at least not any place that I could think to look.

* * *

Evenings and weekends with Ruthie and Jane were one constant in my life. The other was work, I suppose, although every case was that little bit different, even against the prevailing sadness and waste that usually backgrounded them.

Much more constant were the Friday afternoon drinks we would have in chambers. There were some ring-ins from time to time, but often it was just me and Bernard and Jim. I told Jane that she was welcome too, but she said that I might need an outlet, because I was too fat to play footy and couldn't even run as far as the corner shop. I wasn't really that fat but I was grateful to her for allowing me that time. I enjoyed the three of us, and the freedom we had to be as offensive as hell without anyone to get in the way.

Jim liked to berate us about indigenous history, and poke fun at our ignorance. You know more about sheep than you do about Abos, he once told Bernard. He had spent a lot of time trawling through early correspondence and newspapers for accounts of murder and ill-treatment of aborigines, and he was in a continual state of outrage that the history faculty would not create a new subject simply called: Massacre. Bernard and I thought the idea sounded quite compelling, because along with informing people about such outrages Jim wanted to question why mainstream Australian history was so silent on those issues. People know that the Japanese censor their history books, he said, and they are all so fucking pious about it. What about us? Why do we excuse ourselves?

Jim also wanted to create a course called The Natives Are Revolting, which would deal with armed resistance by indigenous peoples around the world. Look at the Maori, he would say. Then look at us. They are a warlike people, and we for some reason are not. The warlike always get a better deal. Bernard would ask him whether he wanted aboriginal people to be more warlike, even so late in the day, and Jim would say: I just aim to set out the historical facts, and also the future possibilities. What a person might do with that information I cannot tell. But I will tell you this, he said. It is high fucking time. And don't think just because a civilization is technologically advanced that it is not vulnerable. The more complex a society is, the more brittle it becomes. It can still be destroyed, no matter how imposing it may seem.

Jim would always dominate these debates, mostly because he commanded such a vast raft of facts, and although we could subject him to certain criticism and analysis we could not argue with the blunt and shocking assertions he would make about European settlement. How much of this did you read in school? He would ask. Fuck all, and you know it. Bernard, I like you as a friend, but as a white man you belong to a race of bloodthirsty savages. And you, Nate, you are even worse. A race traitor, administering white man's justice to black kids, and making your wages from it. I tried to tell him that they were pretty paltry wages and he said: the details don't matter, Nate. You live off it just the same.

Bernard asked him once whether he would consider going up to work on one of the desert communities. Jim was strange about that, and he became quite angry, retorting that desert country was not his country. He said that white people wanted to believe that black people belonged in the desert, because they had stolen the fertile land for farming and they needed to dissemble about it. Besides, he would say, there's only horror up there. Jim had done his research and he was in no doubt about it. They call the Aboriginal bars animal bars, he told us. Animal bars. And they do it without any hint of shame.

Jim also began reading us passages from a book that he was writing, called White N----s: Hanging with the PKK. It was a pretty compelling account of his adventures with the Kurds in Turkey, interspersed with flashbacks to his own past as a young aboriginal man and also some speculation about the similarity between Kurdish and Aboriginal history. The book contained a long epilogue that speculated upon the lessons that might be learned from the PKK, and as you might expect they were radical lessons and Jim did not make any apology for it. The final page of that epilogue might be worth quoting here:

Land is held by blood, not by diplomacy. Look at the nations of the world to realise the truth of this assertion –

Even in that rare case where land is granted through some political process, nations must be prepared to spill blood to defend their land from that point onwards. Israel, for example, must fight without relent, and through a state of almost constant warfare they have managed to retain their beloved slice of land in the face of unrelenting hostility from their neighbours, and from the hatred of anti-Semites everywhere in the world. If hesitation and cowardice were to creep into their hearts they would lose their homeland in an instant, and the Jews might become a mere footnote in the annals of history –

How long will we wallow in hesitation and cowardice? How long until we claim our traditional lands as our own? All that is sure is that it has been far too long, and that we must now fight with everything we have in order to avoid our utter destruction.

The book was politically controversial but it was also quite interesting from a literary perspective. Jim had developed a view that oral traditions were more intact and robust than written traditions, so after a few false starts he bought himself a dictaphone and spoke the text of the book into it. He then typed it up more or less without addition or subtraction, and it was eventually published in that same form. Jim's technique lent the book a bit of a loose feel, with tangential riffs beaten out against the constant repetition of the central theme. It also gave the language a certain impassioned intensity, and I could clearly hear Jim's spoken voice coming through the words as I read them. There was certainly his fervour for the subject matter, and his tendency toward outrageous or even shocking assertions where others would be far more diplomatic.

The book was published to a bit of excitement in this country, although most of the publicity it attracted was negative. Conservative commentators expressed outrage, dismissing the work as warmongering and pseudo-history. More liberal journalists were mostly silent, I suppose because the book offended their delicate sensibilities with its chilling description of guerrilla warfare, and the cold-blooded murder of teenaged conscripts. The Turkish Government made a direct appeal to the Australian Government to have the book banned, and the University history faculty distanced itself from the work in a press release that drove Jim almost insane with rage.

So that was the fate of the book. While Jim was writing it, though, there was just me and Bernard to enjoy it, and to marvel at Jim's emotional range, and maybe suggest just some minor improvements. He would come to drinks and read from his manuscript, and he would often pull out his dictaphone and record himself explaining various aspects of the story to us. For me the best part of these readings were his descriptions of his mum, whom he painted lovingly, and also the bleak times when he was using heroin and whatever else he could inhale or smoke or inject to get himself high. There was a great description of chroming, which was really very unique, because literate people don't get high that way and cannot plausibly write about it. He said that the aim was always obliteration:

the forgetting of who you are, and eventually the total destruction of the grey matter that causes you suffering in the first place.

Sometimes Jim would allow our discussions to veer away from his comfort zone. He would listen to our gossip about other lawyers and judges and magistrates, and he would be outraged when he heard some of those stories and say things like: You see the thin veil of your justice. You see why it can't be trusted.

There was room for trivia, too, and the usual talk that people engage in. Jim and I would talk about Elle and Jane and grumble a bit just for show, and there was still a bit of mystery surrounding Bernard and his unusual love life. He spent so much time with Ruthie that everyone presumed he was her boyfriend, and when we asked about that he said that he enjoyed spending time with her and especially taking her out, because every man he met was envious of his beautiful and graceful companion. He also told us that she lived at a slightly odd angle to the world, and that it made her very unique and refreshing company. She surprises me, he told us. The things she sees, the things she knows. There are not many people who surprise me anymore, I can guarantee you that.

Jane had told me that Bernard was probably gay, and I eventually asked him point blank and he just said: that isn't relevant, Nate. I wheedled some more, and he blocked me for a while, and then he sighed and told me that he was essentially asexual. I said that no one is asexual, and he told me I was a plain bigot and that I should look it up sometime. I did look it up, and sure enough there were a few articles on the net about it. Some labelled it a kind of neurosis, but others were prepared to accept it as a normal variation of human sexuality. I asked him whether he had ever had sex and he said: now you are just being puerile. I thought I should bring the subject up with Ruth but I could not bring myself to broach it, and in the end I suppose I took a leaf out of Bernard's book and I just left them to work it out between themselves without prying or being puerile. And from the outside at least they both seem to be incredibly happy with one other, with the strange and wonderful intimacy that they have created between themselves.

Jane and I were also very good together, very easy and close, and we always treated each other well. After we had been together a year her lease ran out, and I asked her to move in to our place. I expected a certain yes but instead she said no, insisting that that she would only move in with me if we were going to be forever. I got a bit pissy about that, and I pulled back for a while, until Bernard walked into my office one day and closed the door and said something like: Nate. I know you aren't stupid, and I don't think you're crazy. Are you going to let her go? I told him what had happened and he said: a woman like that says forever, and you get shitty about it. He shook his head and told me: whatever that is, Nate, it is time to get over it.

He was dead right of course. I confronted my conscience and I saw I had been stupid, and I wrote a sincere apology to Jane telling her that I loved her, and that I wanted nothing more than to be with her forever. I took Ruthie out the next weekend to find an engagement ring, and after a few false starts with fantastically expensive diamonds, Ruthie pointed out a lovely clear aquamarine set in white gold with tiny diamonds. Even though I knew it was the right one I still got an assurance of exchange from the saccharine-sweet sales lady, and I paid and we walked away with a tiny box, with Ruthie totally beside herself with excitement and a pretty good risk of blabbing about it. I told her that I was thinking of asking Jane in a plush restaurant where we had been on our first real date, but Ruthie told me that I should ask her on the beach, so that if she said no I could go for a swim to cool off. I feigned hurt at the suggestion that Jane might refuse, and Ruthie reassured me that with such a beautiful ring nobody would ever turn me down.

The following day I drove Jane and Ruth down the peninsula, and with winks and giggles I asked Ruthie to stay in the car for a bit, and she actually squeaked with the effort of containing such an enormous secret. Jane gasped when I knelt down and showed her the ring and she said: are you serious? And I said I am serious, I have never been more so, and she said that she would love to marry me, and only really wondered why I had taken so long to ask her. I asked her to wait while I got Ruthie from the car, and she danced around singing and nearly crushed Jane with hugs and went through two rolls of film trying to get the perfect angle of me and Jane re-enacting our proposal.

When Ruthie was off getting an ice cream I told Jane I hoped she didn't mind that there were three of us on such a special day, and she said that she didn't mind at all. And she also said something like: I love the way you are with her. You're so warm and kind, and you show me the same regard. You are the sort of man I was always hoping for, but didn't really hope to find. And she turned to me and gave me a deep kiss and any reservations I might have had just melted away, and I too wondered what had taken me so long to ask this woman to be my wife.

* * *

Jane and I were married after a quick engagement. After I had proposed my only reason to wait was to reassure her parents, but they were almost as eager as we were. They knew Jane was a smart girl, and as they both told us: when you know, you just know. The fact that her dad was an old Xav probably helped us quite a bit, especially as he had also run a bit in his day.

So it was. We were married in the Edinburgh gardens, and we had a wonderful buffet lunch under some white canvas awnings amongst the trees. I had Bernard and Jim as my groomsmen, and for a while there was a bit of confusion about which side Ruthie should stand on. She ended up deciding that she wanted to be a bridesmaid, but she also wanted to be the one to look after the ring. This slightly mottled arrangement hung together and soon we were married, and our guests were drinking themselves into an extreme state of refreshment. Elle sang for us, with a bassist and a piano, and for once she seemed to be just enjoying herself and the music she was making, rather than pouting and flipping her hands around and flirting with the whole of the congregation.

As the afternoon wore on the sky darkened, and when the air cooled suddenly and ominously Bernard got on to the microphone and directed people back to our place. I protested that we had no food or drink but he smiled and hushed me and told me that I would find everything in order. When we got home we were met by starched young wait staff in aprons and ties, with drinks on ice and finger food and even a little PA in the corner so that we did not blow our speakers. As the skies opened up the last of the guests cantered down the street to the shelter of our house, and with music and food and wine and the guests all pressed together the celebrations really got going. We danced cramped close in the kitchen, and Jane went and changed and appeared in short black dress that was little more than a slip, and she looked so hot and so cool that I actually gasped to see her, and at the fact that she was somehow now my wife.

There were speeches, relatively brief, and Jane made a very funny one in praise of her and me. She speculated upon what had drawn us together, and she told the crowd that everyone should endeavour to intermarry and have children of mixed race, so that nobody could be racist anymore. To our black and white babies, she said. Like penguins! Said Ruthie. Everyone laughed, and Jane raised her glass to Ruth. To our little penguins! And the music was pumped up again, and everyone started to dance and move with whatever rhythm they had, and in

what little room they could find, and the celebrations became so complete that nothing else mattered anymore.

The only sour note concerned Jim. When he got back to our house he was good and hosed, and he leaned against the kitchen bench glaring darkly at Elle as she flirted and danced with the flash young barristers that Jane had invited. He drank himself further down, into real dirty drunk, and at one stage Bernard came up to me and warned me that things might get ugly pretty soon. There was one guy that Elle kept returning to, and he was stupid and careless like an overgrown boy, and when he eventually leaned in to kiss Elle, well that was the end of that. Jim lunged for him but Bernard was watching, and he got between the two of them before any punches could land. He faced Jim and held up his hands, and Jim let fly with some abuse and then told us that we could all go and fuck ourselves. Bernard followed him as he staggered down the hall and out into the street, and he snatched up an umbrella and walked Jim home and put him to bed. Meanwhile Elle got on with the job of flirting with every single man in the room, although she knew by then that she should not try it on with me.

It could have been very ugly, but as it was the guests just giggled and went back to dancing and carousing. Ruthie was worried about Bernard but he was back in a short while, and he told us that Jim was in bed and that everything was fine. The night wore on with dancing and plastered conversation and one visit from the police about the noise. At the end there was a bunch of drunken baby barristers jostling for room on the couch, crying out for more wine, and when I pulled out a few bottles they cheered, and they cheered louder when I told them that the bride and groom were off to bed. Most were still there in the morning, rough as guts, a few draped asleep in strange postures across the couches and the floor.

When Jane and I went to bed she asked me whether I wanted to re-enact our first night together. I stroked her hair and said: if you do. She laughed and said: the fuck I do. And so we had our wedding night, and even though it only comes once it came with a strange and great reassurance to me that all need of haste or urgency was ended. As we clinched and moved upon one another that quiet thought came into my head, and I turned languid and slow, and she moved in that way too, feeling the time we had ahead of us now, and the constancy that we had promised one another. I suppose we really became husband and wife, in that moment of reassurance, and when we woke to our bombsite of a house we stood with each other and looked at it together, and as we laughed with our sore heads I knew that this was what everyone was so crazy for, and I knew without doubt that I had made the best decision of my life, when I finally plucked up the courage to ask this woman to marry me.

* * *

The house was a tip but there was no real damage and we cleaned it in half a day. Jane’s barrister mates helped, looking very second-hand, and Jim even came up to help with the bottles. He told me that he wanted to apologise, especially to Jane, but I told him that everyone had been drinking and there was nothing to apologise for. Still he did the right thing and said sorry, and Jane hugged him and thanked him and got him a Berocca. Jim also asked after Elle, saying that she had not come home, and I thought hard and told him honestly that I could not remember seeing her leave. The boy who tried to kiss her was also gone, but I thought I had best leave that part of it alone.

Elle eventually came home, with some rank excuse about where she had been. Jim apologised but the relationship now had a terrible sickness and it was not very long for this world. Jim would come to our Friday sessions more and more consumed with complaints about Elle, and they were soon about more than just

her flirting and dancing with some random guy. He found a letter that she was writing to a man from over the other side of the country, and when he confronted her she told him it was someone she had been on and off with during university, now just a cherished friend. Jim refused to believe it and he demanded to see all of their correspondence. Elle told him to fuck off but he trashed her desk and her papers and found half a dozen letters from him on pretentious hand-made paper, along with a sheaf of his love poems. He then broke into her computer and printed out her whole email account, and with Elle screaming threats at him he went straight down to the State Library to read and re-read the words that he had found.

They made for bad reading. Her letters especially, filled as they were with expressions of love and longing. They cut Jim very badly, and he underlined all of the incriminating passages, and then he brought the whole mess down to Bernard and me that same afternoon. As we read he was really pacey and he was full of threatening words, and I told him he should stay with us at Drummond Street for a couple of days just so that he could cool off. He refused that offer, shouting that he was not going to be made a stranger in his own home. Bernard offered to mediate between him and Elle and Jim reluctantly agreed to that, but when Berns rang her she refused the offer and told him that the relationship was over. She also said that the police had paid a visit, and that Jim should stay away.

Bernard and Jim ended up at our place, with Jim still very wound up, but I had told him that he had to behave himself around Jane and Ruthie and he was able to control most of his anger. We had some dinner, and then we sat down to a glass of dessert wine and figured out what we should do.

Jane took the lead, which I was thankful for, because Jim had stopped listening to me. She was direct without being brutal, and she told Jim that he would have to swallow some of his pride if he wanted to continue his relationship with Elle. She said that she was prepared to go there with him the next morning, and try to patch things up, and Jim agreed to go with her and to keep his cool as well.

They went down to the house the next day, and Jane knocked on the door while Jim waited out on the street. He was hopeful, but when Elle answered the door she was anything but conciliatory. She said that she was sick of Jim and his desire to control her, and she also said that she wanted no further contact with him. Jim began to swear at her, and although Jane tried to calm him he stood there and screamed vile curses at Elle until one of the neighbours came out and threatened to call the police. Jane got him back to our place with some effort, and I have to say that I wasn't at all surprised when I heard what had happened. The split seemed bound to stick, and Jim eventually shambled into his bedroom and shut the door behind him. I told Jane that we might have to look after Jim for a while, and she said that it might be a very long while, but that he must not go back there no matter for what reason.

Jim stayed with us for a couple of days, and he seemed to be going quite well, all things considered. Then for some reason he decided to go back home: to get himself some work clothes, or so he said. He wandered back down the road, perhaps hoping that he and Elle would make up, but he was bitterly disappointed when he arrived. When he tried his key in the door the lock wouldn't turn, and as he jiggled it he realised that she must have changed the locks. He flew into a rage and began bashing on the door, yelling at Elle to let him in.
Eventually the door was opened by a tall handsome man in a dressing gown. He smiled benignly but Jim was in no mood for politeness and he asked him who the fuck he was. The man introduced himself as Elliott, and Jim snarled and called him names and threatened to cut off his balls and whatever else.

Now Elliott is a big boy, and he is full of himself as well, and so he just laughed at Jim and his threats and told him to piss off back to Africa. Jim stood his ground and Elliott came down the steps towards him, but when he was halfway down Jim got past him and turned him around. Although Jim was not overly fit he was still very fast with his hands, and from the top step he unleashed a flurry of punches directly into Elliott's face and the side of his head. Elliott went down like a sack of shit and lay sprawled at the foot of the steps, crying and moaning with his hands clasped over his face, with Jim dancing over him and screaming at him to get up and fight.

Elle then ran screeching out of the house and Jim grabbed her by the hair and forced her to look at this amazing Elliott. She screamed louder as Jim laid his boots into him a few times, and then went inside the house to get the things he had come for. He lingered there and smashed a few things and by the time he was out again the police had arrived. They pointed their weapons at him as he yelled at them from the porch, daring them to shoot him. I would bet they came pretty close, especially when he started to advance down the steps towards them, but then he grinned and put his hands on his head and they eventually got him down on to the ground. He was still yelling abuse at Elliott and Elle as the wagon took him away.

I heard this story from Jane, who went down to get Jim out of the lockup. We thought a white woman would be most likely to get him out of there, and eventually she did, after fast-talking the police into seeing things her way. They let him go, but they also told him that he would be charged with assault and trespass, and the sergeant warned him not to go back to the house. Jim protested that that it was his own house, but the sergeant shrugged and said something like: We saw your handiwork today, Mr Farmer. So here's the way it is. Don't go near the house. We won't let you out of here next time you go back there. And you don't want to give us any more excuses to shoot you.

* * *

Jim was eventually prosecuted for the assault on Elliott, but we successfully challenged the exaggerated medical evidence that a doctor friend of Elle had given. Jim stayed out of jail, but he became the subject of strict intervention orders that were granted on an interim basis and then made permanent. Elle also brought Family Court proceedings, complete with irrelevant but juicy accusations of cruelty and overt physical and sexual abuse. I do not know the truth of those allegations, but I do know that if you throw enough shit it will stick, and Jim ended up doing very badly out of the whole fucking disaster.

Jim stayed with us during those proceedings and then for a good while afterwards. He stewed and fumed and after a while his outrage turned to a slow burn of absolute certainty that his race was the chief cause of his misfortune. We wanted to retain good counsel for him in the family court proceedings and I was prepared to stump up the money, but he increasingly saw an inevitability about his fate and he decided to stand up in court and fight those battles himself. Like most litigants in person he did a really poor job, and as he went down he would gesture and threaten and ask: how much of this is because I am an Abo? He was cautioned again and again to conduct himself appropriately, but he just kept acting up until eventually he was excluded from court and they decided the matter in his absence.

* * *

The whole thing was a total disaster, and it left Jim lonely and poor and with nothing much left in his life. Jane worried that he might go back to heroin, and Bernard worried about self-harm, but as it turned out it was good old alcohol

that proved to be his undoing. He would come home stinking of it, and one weekend he worked his way through two slabs, one for each day, sitting alone out on the front steps surrounded by empty cans. Jane told me quietly but firmly that she did not want that in her home, so I told Jim he would have to wind it up a bit, especially around our place, and from that time on we rarely saw him. I heard that he was sleeping in his office at work and one Friday he turned up to afternoon drinks totally messed up, dressed in crumpled and stinking clothes with his eyes hanging out of his head. He told us that the faculty had issued him with a warning for teaching class while intoxicated, and he laughed and said something like: they just don't like me telling it like it is.

He was sacked exactly one week later. He fronted up to drinks and told me he was gone, and although it was late I made some calls to see if I could get him a reprieve. The Dean listened to me very politely, and then he sighed and told me that Jim had urinated in a lecture theatre in the middle of a class, and then gone on to shout about how white people were inhuman and needed to be exterminated. Security had removed him and then cleared out his office, and the Dean told me with genuine sadness that although he knew Jim was suffering this behaviour was intolerable. He also said that I was welcome to come and pick up his things.

I knew that the Dean could hear Jim in the background yelling abuse but he really was very fair about it. He told me that he regretted what had happened, and that Jim had a very good mind. He also made a standing offer to return Jim to his post if he cleaned himself up. I thanked him for that and he said something like: let me know if he recovers, and I'll do what I can to get him back in here again.

When I put the phone down Jim sneered at me and said: you didn't argue very hard. I got angry with him then, like I have hardly ever been, and I told him that I would ring the Dean back just as soon as I could find a way to justify pissing and then preaching race hatred in class. Jim just giggled, and held up his hands in mock fear of me, and right at that moment I felt very weary of him, and I pointed to the door and told him: get out of my fucking office. He paused and said: can I take that bottle? I knew he would take it no matter what I said so I told him to take it and to drink himself to death with it.

It got a bit nasty. He told me in a snide tone that I was a marvellous man, and that he had no idea why people said all those terrible things about me. I warned him not to come home drunk, and he said that he was long gone already. He took a swig and pointed at me, saying: I bet Jane would still let me in. She has this thing for blackfellas, you see. He took another big swig from the bottle, bowed drunkenly to me, and then lurched through the waiting area and out on to the street.

* * *

That was the last I saw of Jim for a long time. I had no idea what had become of him, and I was of course worried, but he had been so vile that I had no interest in seeing him unless he cleaned himself up. I also knew that I was responsible now for Jane as well as Ruthie, and that I could not expose them to this kind of ugliness and abuse. I increasingly thought that Jim might have met with some unfortunate end, but just as sure as he was reckless and drunken he was also a very hard man, and I guessed he would re-appear eventually, with more to tell us about where he had been and what trouble he had gotten himself into.

* * *

In the intervening time Mary briefly re-appeared. I should probably give at least some account of that, although truthfully there is not a great deal to tell. I must have mostly forgotten her, or archived her in my memory, so it was a shock to pick up the phone one day to have her there on the other end asking to speak to me. I was dumb and asked who was calling, just as my memory flared and her name came to me as she spoke it down the line.
She was pleasant enough, and she said that she would like to meet me for lunch. We made a time and she was waiting out the front of the restaurant when I got there, huddled against the wind. I put a hand on her arm and kissed her awkwardly on the cheek. She felt much bonier than I remembered, her small frame wired up with tension, and there was also a slight tremor in her when I touched her, or so I thought.

We went inside and sat down and she looked around nervously, and when she smiled it seemed a wan memory of the way she used to smile. I filled in the silence with news of what I had been up to, and I told her about Jim and his rise and fall and she said in this flip, hard tone: wellity well well. Whoever would have thought?

I told her before she asked that I was married, to get that out of the way, and although she congratulated me I saw her contract quietly into herself. I suppose I must have enjoyed that a little, after the way she had treated me, but mostly I saw how diminished she was, and I actually felt sorry for her, and also quietly grateful for where my life was now.

The rest of lunch was awkward. I had ordered a bottle of wine and Mary kept gulping at her glass, and as the waiter quietly topped it up for her she raised no complaint. When our meals were finished I asked about coffee, and Mary ordered a liqueur coffee with no cream and she bolted that down too. She became very terse and eventually I stopped making much of an effort, and we were mostly silent from that point onwards. I could have asked her about London but frankly I didn’t care to know, and I also avoided questions about whom she might be seeing because they were pointless, out-dated questions to ask. I did ask whether she was working or studying and she said working but she wouldn’t tell me what she did.
At the end of the meal I fixed up the bill, and she smiled a crooked drunk smile and said thanks. We walked outside into the clear and windy day, and she took my arm and leaned her head against my shoulder like she used to do, and although I should have stopped her I just let her lean there as she hid her face from the wind. She asked me whether I remembered the time that Jim got clean with us, and I said that I did, very clearly, and she said: Nate I need to know. Would you do the same for me?

I pulled back and looked at her. She was so tiny, and now I saw more clearly what it was that assailed her. Do you mean now? I asked. She shook her head and said: it is probably better for now, the way things are. But maybe down the line, maybe a couple of months.
I thought and I told her that if it were just me I would say yes in an instant, but I had other people in my life to think about. She said she would be no trouble but I said again that it was not just about me, and that I would need to ask Ruthie and especially Jane about it. Mary smiled and then her old voice came out of her, saying that she understood, and she laughed an almost normal laugh and said: if I were Jane there’s no fucking way I would let me in the house.

I changed the subject then, trying to cadge some more information from Mary about the trouble that she was in, but she was evasive and told me just that it was prescription meds of some sort. She told me that she would flush her stash from time to time, and then go straight out and get herself some more. Not if they were still in the bowl though. She pulled her face into a hard grin and said:

even if someone had pissed on them, I would still put then down my neck. I asked her how she was financing all this and she said she would rather not tell me. I said I was in no position to judge her but she said something cryptic about not sullying my memory of her and that there were things that people ought to keep to themselves, especially where they had got themselves into trouble with absolutely no help from anyone.
That was pretty much it. I was curious, of course, and I badly wanted to ask her about old things but I thought of Jane, and I knew that such things were just dead memories, and that there was nothing but maudlin curiosity in my desire to dredge them up. And although things might have been different they were not different, and the way that things are, the way things actually happened, is all that really matters.

We stood there silently, the wind whipping around us, and she shivered a bony shiver and said that she had drunk too much, and she thanked me again for the wine. No problemo, I said. I told her I should go and she said of course and I thrust out my hand to her but she just clasped it and drew me close and kissed me a lingering kiss on the cheek. I suppose some memory of our old desire was there, but she felt different to how I remembered her, and there was nothing like the torrent of desire that used to sieze me when I touched her. I said goodbye and told her to call if she wanted our help, and she smiled strainedly and said: So you are part of an Our now. Well good for you, Mr Kenny.

I gave her a thumbs up for some reason, and then I turned away from her, and I did not look back at her at all as I walked up the hill towards the office. Whether she stood there looking after me, or whether she also turned quickly and walked back towards her life, I would honestly have no idea.

* * *

That evening before dinner I told Jane about my lunch with Mary. She raised her eyebrows at me in mock accusation and folded her arms, and only stopped dicking around when I told her about the possible drug problem, the fact that she might need our help. She can come here if she wants, said Jane. She is welcome. But until she chooses that wholeheartedly it would be pointless. She also said that dragging her into detox would be about as useful as roping an iceberg, and I told her that Mary had seemed to understand that fact pretty well. I told Jane that she seemed sad and diminished since I last saw her, and Jane said: that’s because she lost you, fella. But her loss was my gain. I smiled and said I was glad she realised what a catch I was, and she said Prize Fucking Marlin you are. But she moved in to kiss me, too, and as callous as it sounds that was enough to banish any thoughts of Mary from my mind.

* * *

I have not seen Mary since that time. It was also a long time before I saw Jim again, and though I spared him more of my thoughts than I did Mary I probably could have done more to get in touch with him, or find out where he was.

There was one time I had a bit of a hint. Elle called me to say that someone had thrown half a brick through her front window, and she demanded to know where Jim was so that she could turn him into the police. I told her that he had disappeared, and she said: he better fucking disappear. The police called around to our place that night to ask me some questions, and I was straight up and I told then that I had no idea where Jim was. I also told them that there may be other people motivated to do such things to Elle, and they eyed me suspiciously and demanded to know who those people were. I told them all I meant was that Jim may not have been the vandal, but they told me to leave the police work to them,

and to concentrate on putting criminals back on the streets. I told them that I would do just that, and I abruptly showed them the door.

Elle eventually called back with a saccharine apology for her tone, as she called it, and she invited me and Jane around for dinner. She neglected to invite Ruthie but when I mentioned that she said: of course, that darling girl is welcome to come too. We went over one Thursday evening, and Elliott simpered to us in his oily way, and he spoke loudly to Ruthie until Jane told him quietly that she was not deaf. I was upset until Elliott made a grand show of pouring some expensive wine he had bought, and Ruthie deftly pronounced it, word for word: a tolerable picnic wine. Jane and I laughed despite our best efforts, and even Elle tittered a little before Elliott glared at her and then turned haughtily away.

That whole night Elliott was just unbearable. His best effort was referring to Jim as Jimmy Blacksmith, until Jane again intervened and told him that this was a racist and offensive nickname. He laughed his slimy laugh and opined that political correctness was getting way out of control. He was such a fuckwit that even Elle seemed embarrassed by him by the end of the night, and I honestly felt like punching him by the time we were finished. I was secretly glad to see that despite all of the repair work his nose remained a little bit skewed, courtesy of Jim and his fast hands that day on the porch steps.

It was a long evening. When we eventually arrived home we debriefed, and even Ruthie thought that it had been an awful night. We resolved never to invite them to our place, rude though that might be, and also that we would make an excuse if we were ever invited there again. As it turned out we never were invited, which was probably the best outcome, although I would have been tempted to go again just to see Ruthie sweetly disparage another of Elliott's expensive wines. Elliott was one slimy fucker, but even he had no rejoinder for that.

* * *

I eventually learned that Jim had headed back down to Gippsland, staying with some friends of his from the old days. I knew he was there because he called me once, pissed out of his skull, and he ended up abusing me for siding with Elle, finally telling me he was going to come and shoot me. I didn't hear from him again for a good long while, but I do know that he started to go to AA meetings, pissed at first and then eventually sober. He did his Twelve Steps and called upon a higher power and then newly sober he fell in with some pentecostal christians, the type my dad used to call Happy Clappers. I got a long letter from him detailing his previous sins and shortfallings, and containing a lengthy apology to me and Jane and Ruthie and Bernard. He said he was re-born, and that he was praying for us to be re-born in the spirit as well. He said we were welcome to come worship at any point, and when Jane heard all of this she rolled her eyes and groaned and said: out of the fucking frying pan.

Jim had a taste for strong drink, even of a spiritual kind, and he ended up joining a Christian residential community in the remote hills up towards the Snowy Mountains. These guys were more than happy clappers. They were an explicitly apocalyptic cult with rigid social rules, and they prayed like the devil for the end of the world to come. They welcomed all who would join them but they spared them no extremity, and though Jim was welcomed he was welcomed as one of the children of Ham. He was given a Hebrew name that meant ebony, and thus black and hard, and if ever there was a true name for Jim they gave it to him without a shadow of a doubt. This hard black man lapped up their dire predictions for the end of the world, and with it so imminent he would have had them armed and ready, but they had a prediction about their own massacre at the hands of the unclean, and they aimed to put up no resistance. In any event they had given up even their hunting rifles, after the Waco calamity in the US.

So there Jim stayed and prayed for the end of the world, but as he read chapter and verse the story of the Hamites began to rankle with him, and also the fact that his brethren would field no question of it. It began to cut him as a racist myth, and he was told that a rebellious spirit was his inheritance from Ham, and his mind suddenly sharpened again and he began to rebuke them volubly for their stupidity, and their slavery to a perverted and racist Book. Within an hour four strong young men had marched him to the front gate and thrown him into the road, and told him to return when Satan had done with him, and he swore at them and threw stones and promised that he would return a long time before that.

Two nights later a terrible fire destroyed the cult's dining house and reading room, and they remained in ashes for the best part of a year due to the prevalent view in that sect that insurance was close kin to gambling. I do not know whether it was Jim who incinerated these buildings, and I will not speculate upon it, but the possibility is not far from my mind. As he was later to explain to me, it only takes twenty minutes for a small fire of twigs to completely engulf a house. And in the night there would be no one to see the escape of a man made from ebony, angry and now vindicated and hard, hard like fucking nails. I wonder now whether Jim got a taste that night for the retribution that could be wrought upon people by the agency of fire.

We might have seen him then, because he had nowhere else to go, but Jim had developed a liking for life up in those mountains. He built a stick and tarp shelter close by a shady creek, and he stole a rifle and a few boxes of ammunition from a farm he had been staking out. It was a good heavy Winchester with a precision scope, and at dusk he would sight it across cleared land from the cover of the adjacent bush and bring down roos or deer that he would field-dress in the fading light. Occasionally he would take a sheep, if there was no other game, but he was careful with that resource because too many kills and farmers might come out looking for him. I don't know whether he took any tips from his friends the PKK, but I suppose that he would sometimes watch proceedings at the Christian commune with an itchy trigger finger.

Game meat and water is no diet for a human being, and as Jim grew gaunt he began to worry about malnutrition. He would raid citrus trees at night and that probably kept his teeth from falling out, and he would steal bread and butter and biscuits from little farmlets and ravenously devour them where he stood. He tried not to take too much from anyone, so that nobody would realise he had been, but he would find the odd salami or block of cheese that he could not resist and steal the whole thing. He would leave some ammunition when he did that, as a means of payment, and he had no idea of the fear he must have caused people by this well-meaning and yet terrifying gesture.

And he was utterly alone. He suffered terrible pangs of loneliness and his past would not let him be, with constant accusations of having failed his mother, and at last his own wife who was now finished and done with him. He toyed more than once with the idea of turning the gun on himself and he never really made a decision about that one way or the other, although he began to see very clearly the way his mind was heading. Eventually he broke down and cried and could not stop, and when he did recover he decided to come back to the city and see about life again. He stole some plumbing pipe and grease and he interred his rifle in the ground, and he buried his ammunition in the same way, and he walked all the way back down from the hills to the river flats surrounding the nearest decent town, and with a stolen twenty dollar note he bought himself a roast dinner and a pint of beer at the local pub.

I know this story because the next thing he did was ring me, and I drove straight down to get him, despite the fact that it was getting late. He reeked a bit, a dirty human reek, and as we drove home with the windows open he threw up his roast dinner out the window without any warning.

This is madness, he said. Going this fast. He told me that in the bush time and distance still meant something, and that the colours in town made him quite disoriented. The bush asks you to make fine distinctions, he said. In the city the lights drive everyone insane.

I said very little in case I unsettled him. He had no one to talk to for the best part of a year, and he seemed pretty fragile and I did not want to make that any worse. When we got back to the house he stripped off on the front veranda and walked in his underwear to the bathroom. Hot water, he said. I forget what it feels like. He said it would ruin him and make him soft again and I told him that was probably a good thing. I got him some tracksuit pants and a long-sleeved top and I asked him what he wanted me to do with his other clothes and he said: put them in the bin. I did that and then made him a sandwich, but when I went to give it to him I found him passed out on the bed in his old room. I left it on his side table and went to bed myself. When I checked on him the next morning he was asleep on the polished wood floor, with just a folded blanket as a mattress. I took the stale sandwiches away and waited for him to wake up, but he wound up sleeping there for a really long time.

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He was different, our Jim, and I think it was the bush that had made him so. When he spoke he would mostly avert his eyes, and he spoke softly and slowly and with great circularity, so that it was easy to forget the subject of your conversation when it was finally your turn to speak. At any question he would pause for so long that you would start to ask another one, and then he would give a tangential answer that always contained more detail than most people could make sense of. I asked him about it and after a long pause said: I dissipated myself before. But now I make myself a vessel for an indomitable spirit. Those words are his words, more or less verbatim. He also told me in his strange cadences that he would not sell himself again with cheap talk and gossip, that he would not sell himself with lies.

Jane was a bit worried about Jim’s new manifestation, and she asked me whether we should perhaps get him some professional help, as she politely called it. I told her that he would probably not agree to it, and that they would only treat him forcibly if he was a danger to himself or others. I was not as worried as Jane because I had seen Jim so much worse for wear. In fact I was starting to think that this was the first I had ever seen him sane.

* * *

Jim stayed with us for most of the next few months, although he would sometimes go down to see his relatives in Gippsland. He wanted to write again, so I gave him a really slow old laptop with no battery that I had stashed in the back of a cupboard. He asked me to sit with him a couple of times, talking slowly while I tapped away at the keyboard, and we got down quite a few thousand words that way. It also reassured me about his sanity, because although his ideas were extravagant he was able to marshal them to a high degree of intelligibility and order. I asked him a couple of times what his new book was about, but he was a bit evasive, telling me only that it was a book about the land, and about the intelligence of the land and what it may desire from the people who walk upon it. What he ended up with was a fairly slim book, published under the title *To Dream the Longing Land*. It was a series of meditations upon a range of

interconnected topics – colonial occupation, racist myths, the duty of Resistance. These meditations were pretty radical in content, but by far the most controversial aspect of the book were the sections in which Jim reported conversations that he had – whether in some dream-space, or in hard reality, it was a little hard to tell – with the very land itself. And I mean: Rocks. Rivers. Trees. Mountains. He portrayed himself asking questions and receiving answers from these inanimate things, which I suppose he would say were anything but inanimate. As an example I will include a snippet of something attributed to a stand of remnant bush jutting out into degraded cattle pasture, up in the foothills of the Snowy. I include it for its special relevance to what has come to pass:

Do not shy from us, Man of our own heart. Man of the Longing Land –

You know in your heart what we yearn for. You know because your spirit and our spirit do not differ in substance or composition –

You know the ways of the Savage, what they have brought to Our Land. So it was foretold. You know what wounds we bear, for you suffer the same –

You know what is to be done. You have strayed on to other paths but you were always in Our Heart. You know what is to be done –

In Dreamtime you would burn us and we would delight in the flame that came from your hands. Your fire, our fire, a great cleansing of the land. This your ancestors knew, and you in your same blood know. And you know: we would have you burn us again –

Do not shy from us, Man of our own heart. Man of the Longing Land. Remember us, you of our own heart. Remember us, do not turn away.

When I read a draft of the book, which did not differ much from the final edition that was published, I thought it was going to be an absolute sensation. It was bold, and it was original, and it seemed to hook in to themes in Australian history that were ripe for robust treatment. But it only ever made minor sales, and it met mostly with silence in critical circles, and Jim took all of this rather badly, after initially being so upbeat about getting published again. He knew it was a good book, and he was disappointed with its reception, but he soon put it all down to racism, and that seemed to make him feel better about it. I really should have guessed, he would say to Bernard and me.

I am not sure about the racism claim but I do think that the book was a little too much for most people to handle. For serious historians there was just a mess of subjectivity, without any factual matter that could be referenced or tested for truth. One reviewer treated the conversations as metaphor, whereas the book in fact made flat-out claims that the conversations were literal transcriptions of what had been said by the spirit of the land: the trees, the sentient rivers and mountains. Other people just avoided the issue altogether, and one patronisingly called the book “the poetics of post-colonialism”. There was at least one article in the conservative press that asked questions about Jim’s sanity, using the DSM-IV to diagnose various psychotic disorders based on his claims of having spoken to inanimate objects, referencing the medical literature and other cases of madmen talking to trees. The articles also branded him criminally insane for his imagining the “cleansing” power of fire. There were a couple of articles by liberal thinkers who seemed anxious about those same claims, about fire as a weapon of resistance, but they tended to bow to cultural relativism by saying: who are we to judge?

In the end the book did very little for Jim, apart from winning him speaking engagements at a few universities, where instead of expounding upon his own

experiences he turned vague and coy about what exactly he learned from his communion with the land. When he was questioned about his subjective experience he would demur and say only that we shouldn't be surprised at anything in a land so ancient as this one, especially when we are reared in a grotesque culture that only wants to pillage the land and leave it dead and degraded. He would also hint that wisdom of this sort is secret wisdom, to be made available only to the elect, and that he regretted going into any detail about it, in a book that he now said was evidence only of his own arrogance, his own pride. Jim said that a brutal colonial culture would only ever subject such claims to ridicule, without regard for the possibility that this sort of wisdom is beyond its stunted understanding. And he would use the opportunity to say things like: this is a brutal culture. You do not parley with a brutal people, or seek their favour. Rather: you resist their influence, and deny their claims, and seek out their destruction at every opportunity that you have.

I do not know exactly what had changed him but this was a new Jim, in every aspect of his being. His speech remained slow, and he made little eye contact, and his sentences were long grave things full of clear opinion and unrelenting dissent. His new gravity and steely speech won him some ardent admirers, and when the fuss about the book had subsided the Dean came good on his promise to give him his old position back, along with the opportunity to write a curriculum called: Invasion.

Jim only told me about this after he had turned the offer down. He said that universities were no place for a radical anymore, and that he had more important work to do than to teach well-meaning white children to despise themselves. He asked me whether I would let him stay at Drummond Street for a while until he worked out what to do for money, and I told him again, as I had always done: there's a bed for you here whenever you need it. He smiled and asked me: do you think of me as a charity case? It seemed a genuine question, asked in good humour, and I thought for a moment and said: I think of you as family, Jim. This is what family does. He said that he would repay us one day and I told him not to worry about that, and to concentrate on what he needed to do to get back on track again. He said with a smile: back on track. I wish I knew what that meant, now that I finally see things clearly.

* * *

In late November Jim disappeared for a while. There was no song and dance about it, or any notice at all. I just came home from work early one mid-week afternoon to find a note from him saying that he had gone bush again, and that he might be gone for some time. It was a pleasant and very polite note, thanking us for our hospitality, and promising to return as soon as he was able.

Just after he left we had some wonderful news, the first good news in a quite a while. Jane was pregnant, even though for various reasons we were not too hopeful about that happening. She told me one evening after dinner and I messed up a bit because I was shocked and I didn't quite know what to say. Jane was a bit hurt, and thought that I was disappointed, but then I found myself in tears telling her that it was the best thing that had ever happened to me and that the news was almost too good, and she wept a little too. When we had composed ourselves we went to tell Ruthie about it, and she went totally nuts, running up and down the house squealing. She called Bernard even though it was quite late, and he rushed over with champagne and then spent the rest of the evening apologising to Jane for the fact that she could not enjoy it with us.

We soon found out that our one baby was in fact going to be two, and that they were both girls, and although Jane wanted that to remain a secret it somehow got out. Ruthie got more excited as she learned more about it, and she wanted to

redecorate the twin's room, and she even said that they could have her place when they were teenagers and needed their own space. Jane and I were careful to remember that first pregnancies can be tenuous, but so far those concerns have turned out to be unnecessary. We have to maintain them, though, and manage our expectations, even though Bernard keeps telling me to enjoy the anticipation without worrying too much. He's usually so cautious, especially about future events, but for some reason he keeps assuring me that everything is going to be fine.

* * *

Jim reappeared just prior to Christmas, just as suddenly as he had left, and unlike the last time he looked quite well fed and relatively relaxed. I asked him whether he had gone back to see the Christians, and he told me that he might have paid them a little visit. He also said that he had been back to his bivouac camp and his creek, which I knew meant back to that rifle, but he didn't seem minded to tell me much more and I let him have his silence. He wanted to know about Elle and I told him what I knew: still living with Elliott, still calling herself Starburst or Sunflower or whatever it was, still waiting for fame to come and grab her like it ought to have done a long time ago. As Jim nodded something twigged in me, and I asked him in a serious way whether he had brought that rifle back with him. He laughed and said: no, but I like the way you're thinking. Don't worry, he said. I don't plan to shoot Elliott, or anyone else for that matter. I told him our news and he seemed genuinely glad, and he bought Jane a bunch of flowers and she hugged him and told him that it was good to have him back.

Christmas came around in the next few days, and there was an ease about it that now seems strangely out of place. We had our usual Christmas lunch at our place, which since it now involves Bernard and his mother has become an absolute extravaganza. Bernard procured an enormous turkey barely able to fit into the oven, and he got it going some time in the very early morning so that it would be ready for lunch at one. He also trawled wine auction sites for something special to drink – serious champagne to start, followed by some vintage Margaux or Pauillac or whatever else. Denise would help Ruthie put together ridiculous salads and sides and there was always a mountain of food sitting there when we finally reached the table. And there were Jane's folks, who always brought presents, and who seemed to really enjoy the proceedings, especially when they got a couple of wines into them.

So there was wine and food and family. It was hard not to enjoy it, and by the time we had eaten our first plateful we were always a bit rowdy and speeches would be made, going around the table in turn. Bernard was always the most eloquent, and Jane the funniest by far, but we all had a go and would receive equal applause especially from Ruthie, who loved this part of the day. I recall that Jim said a couple of things about our hospitality towards him, and how he owed us his life, and I think there was also something cryptic in there about how we should remember him for his intentions, and the fact that he had always done his best, although that might be reconstruction on my part. What I do remember is that he did not drink any wine, and that he seemed a bit distracted and sad, and that Jane went over to him at one stage and gave his shoulders a squeeze and asked if everything was OK. In the full glare of hindsight that seems a prescient question, but Jim just smiled feebly and told her that things were fine.

Jim stayed with us over New Year. We were all so lame that we missed the countdown and were in bed before midnight. We went down to Mick's place for the first two weeks of January, and although we tried to convince Jim to come he insisted that he would rather stay home and do some writing. Jane asked him what he was going to write and he said: another book, if I can manage it. One that no one will like. She asked him whether he might be literature's Van Gogh

and he said something like: Vincent was ahead of his time. I'm a hundred thousand years behind. Jane was concerned about him being alone and thought he should come down to the beach, but I told her what we already knew: that Jim was stubborn, and that wild horses would not shift him from what he had decided to do. I left him some money for food, even though he said he was fine, and I asked him to water the garden, and he promised that he would call us if he felt like coming down.

It is always great at Mick's, especially when there's a crowd. We have lunches thrown together from plates of ham and beetroot and cheese, all plunked roughly out on the table with fresh bread rolls, and endless barbecues at night. After every meal aunt Tilly will thrust the rubber gloves at the person whose turn it is to do the washing up. We went to the beach every day unless it was raining, and we sailed and sailed without ever getting sick of it. Mick had traded his old catamaran in on a new one, bigger and faster, and on breezy days there would be two of us hanging out on the trapeze as the opposite hull cut slick and fast through the waves.

There was a sour note though. I got a call from Elle towards the end of our stay, saying that Jim had written to her in breach of the order that was in place. I asked her what was in the letter and she was very short with me. What do you think? she said. I told her I would get in contact with Jim and warn him against doing that in future. She said that I should do more than warn him, and that she was still considering reporting the matter to the police. I said that was a decision for her, and I also said that writing a love letter was on the mild side of possible breaches of the order. I asked her whether she had any other message for Jim, given what he had written, and she said well how about this: go and fuck yourself, loser.

She was never very pleasant, our Elle.

I rang Jim straight away. I told him that he had been stupid, and that he could go to jail if Elle decided to involve the police. He said he was aware of that, and that he just wanted her to know that he still loved her. I said: that would make no difference to a magistrate, and he asked me: did she say anything about me? I could have been hard, but I just said: only that you should stay away, and observe the terms of your order. Jim thanked me in a weirdly polite way and hung up the phone. I sent him a text message later that day saying again that he should stay away from her, and he texted me back to say thanks and that he hoped we were having fun. It was quite weird, Jim being so polite, but it was a very welcome change and I did not think that it meant anything particularly significant.

* * *

In the middle of January we decamped again for the city, and as the month wound up to a close we all headed back to work. Jane had a few days longer than the rest of us, owing to the courts being in recess, but by the start of February we were all back in the saddle. The worst of the hot weather had started to set in, and there were predictions of some really awful stuff for the weeks to come. We still had no air conditioning in the main part of the house, so we would all eat dinner in the arctic cool of Ruthie's little house, propping plates of cold meat and salad on our knees. We even stayed for the lame old movies, watching breathless confessions of love and screen kisses as that cool air floated down. Ruth was a gracious host and she never complained, even though it was obvious to anyone that we were cramping her style. Some nights I would take Jane out to Victoria Street for noodles or rice paper rolls in an effort to give Ruthie her own space. It was lovely walking in the warm night air with Jane, and we were indulgent and thought up baby names. I liked her selections but she always screwed up her

face at mine, so I tried to find names that were really outlandish and I was surprised to find that she genuinely liked some of them: Tabitha or Petal or Ruby-Lou. We would try them on Ruth when we got home, and she liked every single one of them pretty much the same, and she wrote them down on a list she was keeping so that we wouldn't forget. And she even waxed philosophical about it, saying: you won't know their names until you meet them.

I wondered about that and I spoke to Jane about it, whether she thought that people come into the world already possessing a name. And she wondered about my original name, what my birth mother might have called me, and how things might have been different had I been called something other than Ignatius. That was interesting to speculate upon but mostly I thought that I was quite happy with my given name, because I would not have had my life unfold in any other way. Maybe meeting Jane earlier, I suppose. But then, you know, there's that question. Would either of us have been ready? Could things really have worked out in any other way?

* * *

So finally we come to it.

Late last Friday morning I got back from court to find Jim sitting in my office. He was writing furiously on a stack of plain paper, and there was another stack next to him that was growing one page at a time. I sat down in one of the chairs opposite my desk, waiting for him to say hello, but he looked up at me and grunted and turned back to his writing. He looked a bit wild, with his hair all over the place, and there were deep grey shadows under his eyes. I told him he looked like he could do with a coffee, and he looked up and said: sleep, more like it. Or food. And then he went back to his writing.

I was silent for a while and then I asked him what he was doing and he said: what does it look like? I said: but here? He looked up from his papers and said: Here. It's a letter of explanation, Nate. It's important. I began to ask him more about it but he swore under his breath, picked up his papers, and walked out to our waiting area and continued to scribble furiously. Bernard popped out to say hello to him and Jim said, without looking up: sorry Berns but I can't talk. I need to get this finished. Bernard waved and said no problem, and Jim set back to his task intently.

Bernard poked his head in my door, and I beckoned him in. He gestured back towards Jim and asked: is he OK? I shrugged and said he was writing a letter, and Bernard smiled ruefully and said: must be some letter. He was concerned for Jim, but eventually we both went back to work and heard nothing more. When I went out to buy a sandwich I got one for Jim too, and though he did not acknowledge me either on the way out or the way back in the food disappeared pretty smartly.

Some time in the mid-afternoon Jim brought Bernard into my office and sat him down, while he stood and looked out of the window at the park across the street. I was about to make some stupid joke to break the tension, but Jim brought his attention back to us and said: I have something to tell you.

OK, we both said at once.

And he told us.

He said that he had been travelling an inspired path or running a fool's errand, and that it was too early to tell which one it was. I tried to tell him that we knew the path he had travelled but he snarled and retorted: you know nothing about it.

He told us to listen carefully, and we nodded and he said: under no circumstances should you leave the inner city this weekend. Bernard asked why that was, and Jim said that something approximate to the wrath of God was coming, and that even this may only be an approximation of the horror that was to come. We pressed him for more detail and he would only say that there was an apocalypse coming, and that fury was about to be unleashed, and that many people would find themselves in deeper shit than they could ever imagine.

I would provide more detail of Jim's warning but I could honestly swear that this was pretty much it. He told us again to stay put this weekend, and then handed me a fat envelope and said that it was only to be opened in the event of his death. I raised my eyebrows and he said: yeah I know, very Pauline Hansen, but on no account should you open it unless I am gone. I do not want you to be in unnecessary danger.

He seemed to relax a bit after he handed me the letter. He shook Bernard's hand gravely, and he also shook my hand and said again: stay in the city. Do not fucking leave under any circumstances. Bernard tried to encourage Jim to stay for another drink or a snack, and he even offered to drive him up to Drummond Street so that he could get some rest, but Jim refused all these offers and said: I have to go, right now, and try to fix things so far as that is possible. I will do what I can and I need to be quick about it. Wish me luck, and do not leave the city, whatever you do.

And then he left.

Bernard and I sat there stunned for a little while. We had a cool drink and then a fairly tense discussion about what we should do next. I thought that we should respect Jim's wishes, and leave the letter unread, but Bernard argued that Jim seemed to be under serious duress and was obviously incapable of forming any sane intentions. He thought that opening the letter might allow us to help Jim, especially if he was in some sort of trouble that he might be on his way right now to exacerbate.

I was hesitant, and Bernard noticed that and said: I can say what I want, Nate, but the burden of the decision is with you. You were entrusted with the letter. And he is your oldest friend. I told Bernard that I needed to think about it, but I did point out that instructions were instructions even if you happened to disagree with them. Bernard grunted and said: so now you decide to get legal. We had a cursory discussion about what made a client a client, and whether Jim was one, but we both ended up shrugging and going back our drinks.

In the end I procrastinated. I decided to defer my decision until I had the chance to discuss it with Jane. I also thought I might let the issue percolate in me overnight, reasoning that one day could hardly make a difference to the outcome. As it turned out, that one day might have made all the difference. If I had listened to Bernard I might have saved many lives, and although that is far from a certainty (with what I know now about the extent and reach of the powers we are confronting) I must admit that it is a serious possibility. This is something that I will now have to live with: the possibility that I held, even for one day, that much power over life and death.

* * *

It gets worse, too. As it turned out I did not raise the issue with Jane that evening, because I became distracted by some beer and a DVD that she wanted to watch, and the usual sweet calm we felt at the end of the week. And by the next day it was far too late for anything to be done.

* * *

We woke to a hot morning and a foul north wind, and by mid-morning the mercury had passed 40 degrees with no sign of abating. We shut the house down and stayed inside, and as we pottered about there were some reports of fire on the radio, reports that quickly escalated into something very frightening. There was smoke in the air even where we were, and the reports became more chaotic as the pall deepened and seeped under doors into the house. We began to hear helicopters beating out an ominous tattoo, but even at that late stage we still just thought there were severe isolated fires. Nobody really imagined the true extent of the devastation.

As the morning wore on the smoke thickened further and we knew it must be bad. Radio and TV stations halted their regular programming, but although they had some footage they could only really speculate about the true extent of things. It is bad, they kept saying. But we cannot know how bad. I heard some reports that news crews may have been incinerated trying to access danger areas, and I saw one journalist with tears streaming down her face as she battled to maintain her demeanour.

Things went fucking crazy, and that continued until about midday when the power went down. We initially thought it was just us, but despite days passing the power has not been restored, save for those businesses and government departments with emergency supply. I have since learned that much of our power infrastructure has been destroyed, and it is worse for our communications networks, but it will be some time before anyone knows the real extent of the devastation. We had no power for fans or air-con but we but we stayed indoors Sunday too, despite the stifling heat, and although there was an eerie calm - with the power down and the phones down and the complete media silence - that more than anything seemed the best indicator that some terrible disaster had occurred.

* * *

On Monday morning I went into work, not quite knowing what else I should do. I walked into town through streets that were still heavy with smoke, and as I hurried down Drummond Street I began to notice papers drifting around in the hot wind. As I got in to town they became quite thick in the doorways and the gutters, and I stopped to read one, and as I read it I felt my stomach drop and I felt like I was going to throw up right there in the street. I took some deep breaths and then ran as fast as I could to the safety of my office, and I drank some water and sat down at my desk and read the flyer again.

It felt like the end, it really did. There is no other way that I can describe it. I pulled Jim’s letter out of my briefcase, knowing now some of what it must contain, and I scanned it at first and then I read it properly and it confirmed what I already knew in my guts about these fires. I saw what Jim had been so anxious about, and the danger we were now in, and I also saw my terrible mistake in sitting on this letter instead of opening it and acting upon it. I had to re-frame the whole disaster with Jim as a central player, and me with my part in it too, and I saw for the first time the possible scale of this outrage. And I swore and I swore, as though that might make a difference, and I thought of the future possibilities and then I shut my mind down from any further speculation upon that matter.

I was startled when a junior lawyer from the government solicitors came dashing into my office. They wanted to brief me in a suppression application concerning the material contained in the pamphlet, and because they had never used me

before I asked why they wanted me now. The answer to that was pretty obvious and the lawyer seemed prepared for the question, saying: with your background you are uniquely positioned to be persuasive. I knew what that meant, and I understood her reasoning, but I was conflicted out of it and I told her so. She asked how that could be and I said: you wouldn't believe it if I told you.

After the lawyer left I read the letter a few more times, especially those passages where Jim addressed me directly. I soon felt too overwhelmed to read anything further, and I decided that I should go down to the Court, along with what seemed to be every last journalist left in town.

The silk who was eventually briefed by the government had a good reputation, but despite his subtle language you could tell that he knew he was pushing it uphill. First he tried to close the proceedings to the public, but the Judge refused that on the basis that this was clearly a matter of public interest, and that the publication was already in the public domain. That should have been the end of it, but the barrister was instructed to submit that there was no evidence of it being in the public domain. The judge retorted sharply with something like: am I not entitled to take judicial notice of the ankle-deep piles of paper that I waded through this morning on my way into my chambers?

The barrister pushed hard but there was no real case for suppression. The government obviously wanted people to see that it was taking steps to get matters under control, even if those steps were likely to be ineffective. The judge soon rose for a ten-minute recess, and afterwards delivered an ex tempore judgement to the effect that was no basis for an injunction or any other order preventing the publication of the document. She said that the document had been widely circulated and there was no practical way to prevent its wider publication, even if she were minded to grant an injunction on the merits of the case.

The government put up a brave show, taking the matter to the Court of Appeal that afternoon. They cleared the court happily enough, perhaps to ensure some order, but they would not overturn the prior decision and they also awarded costs against the government. Their barrister made a veiled threat that the government might suppress the document by legislation or perhaps emergency powers, but that turned out to be nothing but piss and wind. And even in the middle of the next day there were still copies of that document scudding around laneways and parks and garden beds, available for anyone to pick up and read what it contained.

The next day both papers ran the story on their front pages, even though their print runs were small because of power outages. One published the document in full, and the other one called it vile propaganda unfit for publication no matter how widely it had been distributed. And even though there are few informed people in the world who have not seen the document, it is worth annexing a copy here just for the sake of completeness.

To the wrongful occupiers of Our Land: Koori Land and Ngunnawal Land and Murri Land. Our Land of many Nations:

The Return has begun. Return, by fire and ashes. The Return promised by our Ancestors, as everything returns.

This is pure knowledge: All Things Return.

Your History flows one way, towards your vicious satisfactions. You call it progress. You worship that idol and you are willingly deceived.

But we know: Time forms a circle. All things strain to return to the way they were, through the vast circularity of Time.

This is not revenge. Revenge is a degenerate concept of your own imagination. This is the turning of things toward inevitable Return. Do not pretend to limit this concept to your own corrupted constraints.

We wield fire, as is our right. You burn and you die because you do not belong to this land. This land reviles you and wants you to be scattered and destroyed. Resist that truth for as long as you wish but this ancient land will speak it nonetheless. Our Land speaks to us through Tree and Stone and River and there is no mistake in what it says. You will be destroyed.

This is not injustice. You were warned, sure enough, as the land burned before. You saw how you might be destroyed. You

knew it would burn again, just as you knew it was our right to wield fire, but you were arrogant and failed to understand these things. You have paid your price as servants of ignorant Mind.

The Return. The worst for you is not over. You may rebuild and subdue the land again, but that arrogance too will be burned down into ashes.

We are not a warlike people. We wield fire by the mandate of Our Land. By Fire will your depraved civilisation be laid low.

You have a chance to leave. Most of you will ignore it. The inevitable must then occur.

Heed this. You are interlopers. Our Land will destroy you. This is not speculation but inevitable future fact. You will be destroyed. We know this by means that you could never understand.

You bow to Gods who torment and enslave you, and bind you with false promises of dominion. No memory of your Gods will remain upon this land, no memory of you yourselves. No memory of the filth that you created. No memory of your drink and your diseases and your greed and your filthy, degenerate ways. Your ways are at an end.

So says Our Land.

Anyone with the least amount of discernment would notice the similarity of that language to the language that Jim had increasingly used in his books and his lectures. However although the text might have originated with him in that sense, my overwhelming feeling is that the pamphlet was a deliberate attempt - and a pretty transparent one, the more I compare it with his work - to pretend that Jim was the architect of the disaster. Whatever the truth of that, it will not be too long before someone notices the resemblance in style and sentiment, and when that happens they will come looking for Jim, looking to string him up, and failing that they will look to disgrace his memory, and do whatever else they can vent their outrage against him.

Whatever the provenance of the piece, it gave people a very clear focus for their outrage and condemnation. Coming back from court that day I was jostled a couple of times, and once even spat at. I saw Bernard when I got back to the safety of the office and he told me I looked awful, and I filled him in on what I knew now from Jim’s letter. He told me that had somehow expected this news, much as I had done. I gave him the letter to read, even though that may have put him in danger, and he was a very long time with it, no doubt searching the

margins and the subtext for something to exonerate Jim. When he was done we spoke at length about it, and he repeatedly reassured me that I had done nothing wrong, as I told him that I should have listened to him and acted upon it earlier.

You did the right thing, he said. It's just an unfortunate fact that you might have been better off if you did the wrong thing.

That's about as Bernard a comment as I can imagine.

We talked until the early afternoon and then he told me to go home and rest for a bit, as there was no real work to do. I listened, this time, but as I walked home in the early afternoon cars were stopping in the street, the occupants hurling abuse at me. I was worried for my safety so I hailed a cab, and I was quite relieved to find that the driver was Sikh and probably no danger to me. He asked me where I was going and I told him, and on the way he said that people were going crazy over what had happened, that they would want blood from Aboriginal people in satisfaction and they would take it just as sure as he breathed. He asked me whether I was Aboriginal and I said yes more or less and he told me that no-one could count the millions who had died for less than the colour of their skin. He said that India had witnessed such bloodshed, as Muslim killed Hindu and were then repaid in kind. Even we Sikhs, he said, we have seen our share of bloodshed. He was silent for a while, and then he tapped his turban and said something like: from this present anger my turban protects me. I am no longer the subject of their hatred. I said he was very lucky and he said: I can make you a turban. You are not Sikh but the Gurus would understand. To save a man from persecution, it would be permitted. I told him that I might take him up on his offer, and when we reached our place he gave me his card and said: Do not hesitate. There is no shame, even in deception, if you are protecting yourself and your family from hatred.

I went inside, feeling quite worn, and I poured myself a glass of warm juice from the silent fridge and sat down on the couch. I read Jim's letter over again and cursed his anger and his stupidity, and I wondered what I should do with the letter in the face of the hatred he had provoked. I read until I heard Jane come through the door, and when she got in to the living room she sat down and hugged me tightly, and looked me over as though she expected some bruises or lacerations.

I'm OK, I said.

She shook her head and bit her lip, and then said: for how long? I tried to make a joke about staying indoors from now on but Jane was not in any mood for jokes. This is way past that, she said. People have gone totally berserk. And just you try to tell them that you were brought up white, Nate, that you are really one of them.

It felt good to be safely off the streets, I had to admit, and I knew that Jane was right when she identified the danger I was in. That evening we ate quietly out of cans while Ruthie asked about what had happened, and I fielded her questions while Jane chewed her nails and looked down the corridor as though a mob were about to break down the door and set at me with ropes and cudgels. I told Ruthie that the fires might have been deliberately set and that they blamed aboriginal people like me. But you didn't light the fires, she said. That's true, I said. But they know that someone did, and black people are very easy to blame when things go wrong.

I don't blame you, she said.
I know you don't, I said.

Ruthie then asked whether people would hurt me, and I smiled and said: I hope not. Jane shot me a glance that said something like: you better fucking hope. I smiled weakly at her and she shook her head some more. I wanted to say: it's not my fault, but I knew that wasn't what she was thinking. She was thinking of what was now outside of our little house, and the anger fomenting there, and the fact that it could spill over very easily, especially on someone like me.

When Ruthie went to bed I felt like a proper drink, and so I opened a bottle of burgundy that Bernard had given us and it smelled really very good. I offered Jane half a glass and she took it, but she would not clink hers with mine and she asked me: so this is our last hurrah? I told her not to worry, and that this was a rational country, and the worst I had to fear was being spat on for a few days until the anger blew over. She listened but she also shook her head, and when I had finished she put her wine down and looked at me intently.

That is fucking bullshit, she said.

She told me that I could Pollyanna it all I liked but we lived in a brutal culture. She said, as I have heard her say before, that the later tribes of Britain were savage tribes, and that any lawfulness is just overlay from the Conquest. We are bullies and overlords, she said. Any rebellion from a conquered people will be met with indiscriminate retribution. Ask the fucking Irish, if you really want to know. I tried to tell her that things weren't that bad and she asked me pointedly: how could things get any worse?

I told her about Jim's letter, warning her about it first, and as she gasped and said no no no I told her: I sat on it for a day, when I could have warned someone. She told me that this was not my crime to be guilty for, and I said: I am not so sure. I had given her a basic version of the account contained in the letter and naturally she asked to read it for herself. I told her that it might be better if she had no direct knowledge of it, and that she must be able to see why, and she grudgingly agreed that she would not read it. I had outlined most of it anyway, and I gave it plenty of flavour, and I also told her that he eventually repented from what he had done, to some extend at least, and she said: no doubt that will resound in Heaven, if he ever gets that far.

When I had finished with the telling I asked her what she thought, and she said: divide and fucking conquer. What a great way to destabilise a country. She could not believe that Jim had let himself get caught up in such stupidity, and become the slave of a much bigger player that was just using him and his anger and his ideals. I said that the intention might genuinely be to help Aboriginal people but she told me again to stop painting the world in my typical rosy fashion. She told me that nations only really care about resources, and that they will do what is expedient to get them, even if that means stumping up a few fall guys.

She got more and more angry as she spoke. He got stooged, she said. That pamphlet is such obvious bullshit, with its Eternal fucking Return and the rest of that Nietzschean claptrap. It's just that nobody is educated enough these days to see it. It's the Protocols of the Elders of Zion all over again, and the hoons will lap it up, and they will come after you and also after us and it will be Kristallnacht all over again, and don't be surprised if that happens very soon.

I stoppered up the wine and told her not to worry, and I reminded her that there were options for us, including going away for a while. She waved her hand at me and sighed, but she allowed me to pull her close to me and I said quietly: it's going to be OK. I told her that I would lie low for a while until people remembered that we were individual people, and that you could tar one of us without having to feather the other.

Jane sighed again and I said that I hadn't told her enough how much I loved her, and how she raised me up above myself, and that without her I would have nothing to hold me steady and set me free at the same time. She huffed and told me not to distract her, but she relaxed in spite of herself, and I told her more loving things that were nothings in a sense but also more meaningful than words can say. Soon we left the couch and went to bed, and as we made love it was tender and then urgent and I held her when we were finished, and she said that I was too easy to forgive, and I told her that was her issue and not mine and she laughed and ended up asleep shortly afterwards. I did not sleep very much that night but I listened to her breathing deep and slow, and it was not until the morning that she shouldered the burden of her worry again.

* * *

The morning came and though I didn't feel like breakfast Jane made me eat some anyway, stale bread and soft butter, and she would only allow me to go to work if I let her drive me down there. She made me wear a stupid hat and even sunglasses, and she turned up the collar of my trench coat and she would not hear any complaint about me looking like Inspector Gadget. I told her about the turban idea, intending to be funny, and she nodded gravely at the suggestion and said: that is a really good idea. She dropped me off and warned me to stay in over lunch, and told me to call her when I wanted to head home. Ruthie had made me a jam sandwich for my lunch, and I had also taken some fruit as some insurance against scurvy.

The morning was slow and nothing much happened until I took a call from the police on my landline at about 11 am. I asked them how they had phone service but they just pressed on and told me what had happened. I must have feared it somewhere deep inside myself because I didn't feel any real shock or surprise at the news. I asked them when it had happened, and they were actually apologetic when they said: over the weekend sometime. I thanked them for the news, and then I hung up and sat there for a while before getting up and walking into Bernard's office.

He looked up and I said it, straight up.
Jim's dead, I said.
Bernard said: what?
And I told him again: Jim's dead. The police just called and told me.

Berns was silent after that, and then he swore a couple of times, pretty much the first time I had ever heard that man swear. I just stood there feeling strange and shocked and out of place, with that weird hopeful feeling that someone is about to come in and say that it is all some ghastly mistake. Bernard asked me whether I was OK and I was truthful and told him: I don't really know, to be honest. He wanted to know what had happened, and I told him what I knew: Jim had been admitted to hospital, and he had gotten into a fight, and that he had been killed as a result, as unlikely as that seemed.

Bernard got up and made me sit down in a chair, and he went out to get me a glass of water. He came back in and closed the door, and his hand was trembling a little when he handed me the cup. Fucking Jesus, he said again. We sat there in silence for a good long while, as I sipped at the water, and I tried to imagine Jim dead, and how it could be that he should die in a fight, in hospital of all places, and I wondered what he was doing in there in the first place.

* * *

I had to do something, so I caught a cab up to the hospital and tried to wring some information out of the staff. I was told they could not provide me with any

information over the counter, and in any case they were not at liberty to discuss an adverse event, as they called it. I found the director of nursing and then eventually a consultant psychiatrist, and they both curtly gave me the same story, even when I told them that I was family.

I was about to leave when I had a flash of inspiration. I went back to reception and politely asked whether I might speak with the aboriginal liaison officer. I was told that he would be paged, and although I was prepared to wait as long as necessary it was only a few minutes before he was shaking my hand, asking whether I might like to go out and sit in the hospital courtyard with him. Soon we were sitting there and talking, with my new friend telling me much more than I would have thought he was permitted to tell me, on the basis of cultural sensitivity, as he called it, and my obvious kinship with Jim.

The story was bleak. Jim had been brought into the hospital by four police officers, after he had arrived at their headquarters in a very agitated state. By the time he had arrived at hospital he was very aggressive, swearing and demanding to make a statement about thousands of people who were about to be killed. The treating team tried to calm Jim down but he became increasingly abusive, and finally a psychiatrist injected with accuphase as the only way to subdue him. I asked my friend whether the police had taken a statement but the hospital would keep no information about that, and none of the treating team had dreamed that Jim could have anything sensible to say. I also thought he was ill, said my friend. I nodded and said I understood, because Jim had seemed quite unbalanced to me also, even before he started yelling and swearing and talking about an apocalypse.

When I asked about the way Jim had died my friend was gentle but immovable. That would be a step too far, he said, even for me. He told me that it had happened before, on occasions, and that the accuphase along with the general disorientation caused by the hospital environment tended to make things volatile. I told him Jim was able to look after himself and he said: not in here, not necessarily. Not with how we treat people, and there are are always the dangerous ones. I asked him once more if there was anything else he could tell me and he said: only to give my sincere condolences. And my assurance that in due course you will know the whole story.

* * *

When I got back to the office I told Bernard what I had learned. He was silent and he looked ashen, and he kept shaking his head and saying how sorry he was. He told me that he could find out about viewing the body, but I said that was a pretty low priority for me at the moment, and Berns said: later then. I said yes, although honestly it was about the last thing that I wanted to do.

When Bernard left my office I stood up and went to the window, and as I looked out at the heavy haze I got that dire and dream-like feeling again, like I was about to be woken up, like I wanted very badly to be woken up. That passed after a while and I was left only with the conviction that things had finally tipped over the edge, and gone way too far, and that I needed to set down this whole crazy story so that I could clear my mind and find some bedrock reality again. I felt like I should tell it, for Jim’s sake and for mine, and I also thought that telling the story might help me to work out what the hell I was going to do next, especially with the letter that I should have opened sooner, the letter that may have averted this whole disaster. The letter that may even have saved Jim from a pointless death in a psychiatric hospital, as I suddenly saw to my shame.

* * *

That about brings me up to date. Jane was of course comforting when she heard about Jim but she was also stern with me, telling me that I was not to go anywhere, not even into work until she said that I could.

I was stuck at home which was honestly a bit of a relief, and after moping around for a while I began doing what I needed to do, dictating my recollections into Jim's old battery-operated dictaphone. The start was awkward, but from there the whole story just kind of fell out of me, as if it really needed to be told. I have drunk quite a bit of wine, which tends to loosen my words up, and I ransacked some old papers that I have, and I also dipped into Jim's papers and his books to gather some material. With some old journals and letters - his and mine, including some letters that I did not send, now to my regret - I cobbled everything together, gouging many other things directly from my memory.

It would be fair to say that for the sake of the story I recreated some things and probably neglected others. There were various things that I could tell but I didn't see the point in telling, especially hurtful things that people don't need to know about. Other than that I have genuinely done my best to include everything relevant, and even some things that may seem ephemeral but which fit in with the story and make the story flow.

I guess I will need to go back and polish the narrative sometime which is not such a bad thing, because my house arrest via edict of Jane and now Ruthie is not going to be lifted any time soon. Hopefully the power will be back on shortly. I guess I'll just keep going until I have something more or less coherent, and once that's done I will try to work out where we go from here.

The only thing left is to decide what to do with Jim's letter. We are still debating whether we need to hand it over to the police, and I suppose now there is the related question of whether this account that I have written needs to be disclosed as well. We have already been approached and we have tried to buy some time, but it won't be too long before they come back with a warrant. I have been trying to convince Jane that we need to be open with them, regardless of whatever claims of privilege or confidentiality we might in theory be able to make. There are also those other forces that we might have to reckon with, but they are discreet and also radically unpredictable and I think we might drive ourselves crazy if we try to anticipate their future moves. I still believe that something would have happened by now, if someone had wanted the letter to stay secret, but I guess we can't be sure of that until we make our next move.

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Bernard this is where you come in. I am sorry to get you into this, but then I suppose you are in it already, through our association with one another and also your close friendship with Jim. What he has done may sully your view of him but somehow I do not think so, and my guess is that you will forgive him more easily for it than any other person on the planet. You always understood his rage even though there is no rage in you; and even though it was my absolute inheritance I never understood it or felt it or wanted any part of it.

I entrust this account to you because there is no one in whom I have more faith, and because there may be things here that would be hard for others to hear. You know that words have manifold purposes and in that light I would ask you to please produce different versions of this for the various people who might need to witness it. I aim to tell some things that may hurt some people, perhaps especially Ruth and Jane, but my aim is to give you a potential version that is as complete as possible, so that the twins may read it when they are old enough to

understand. I am writing this for them, as much as I am writing it for the memory of Jim.

You should feel free to improve this account in any way you see fit, but I would ask you to leave it as close to the original as you reasonably can. This is only my story, no more but no less, and the way I have told it is probably as valid as any other version that might be produced.

Bernard I also want to make a final request of you, just in case something happens to me. It probably goes without saying but I must ask: please continue to look after Ruthie, as you have always done so well. I'd entrust Jane to your care as well but we both know that she can look after herself a fair sight better than you or me. She will no doubt be fine with the twins too, but I would also finally ask you: please do what you can to be a part of their lives, and provide them with a man who loves them, and whom they can love and admire. I think that makes all the difference, and I have known women of enormous goodwill who have foundered exactly upon this issue. Tell them that I am sorry, too, that I was not able to be there for them. And if I am gone, you can also tell them that I will haunt the living shit out of anyone who means to do them harm. You do all of this with my heartfelt thanks and gratitude, and my certain knowledge that you will effortlessly guide things to their proper conclusion, no matter what difficulties might arise along the way.

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We have been talking about all of this, and that is partly to avoid bigger and darker questions. What has happened is catastrophic, and I know as well as anyone that there may be terrors in store for us that can hardly be imagined. In the savagery that may come we will be the ones to suffer, and that savagery might turn so general that it brings about a final end to me and people like me. This might even be the real intention of those who rigged this to happen, and Jim's legacy may be simply to initiate the final phase of the complete destruction of his people.

I would like to write some epitaph for Jim, but it is far too early for that, and his real epitaph might be written in blood and annihilation, by such horrors that his rage and thirst for vengeance have brought into being. His letter will have to stand for him, along with this account of mine, but I don't think there is a great deal in either of these things by way of full explanation or understanding.

He was my friend.
I wonder if that's all I can say.
He was my friend.
That's it.
I don't think there is any more that I really have to say.